

Plath's Animals

Representations of Gender and Identity in the Writing of Sylvia
Plath

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to establish how American writer Sylvia Plath utilizes the non-human animal image to explore gender roles and identity. Despite the overwhelming amount of criticism that has been dedicated to Plath's writing and life, the use of non-human animals in her work has rarely been addressed. A primary focus will be on the violence and aggression evident in a large amount of her poetry, much of it aligned with gender and the non-human animal image. In examining the ways in which Plath utilizes animals, a distinction becomes apparent between the majority of her earlier writing and her later work. In Plath's earlier work, she typically uses animals within a triangular model, where the animal's significance is determined by the relationship between the male and female human protagonists. As her work develops, there is an evident shift in the role and representation of the animal images as they begin to depart from the earlier triangular model. In Plath's later work the animal representations are aligned closely with the identities of the female figures. Here, animals essentially take on a mythic, prosthetic role and enable the female figures' transcendence towards a non-victim status. Plath's shifting representations of the non-human animal acknowledge traditional gender dichotomies, but ultimately undermine them.

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Abbreviations

CP *The Collected Poems*

JP *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*

J *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*

LH *Letters Home: Correspondence, 1950-1963*

Introduction

The Poetic Animal: Gender and Representation

According to John Berger, “in the last two centuries, animals have gradually disappeared” (“Animals as Metaphor” 505). With the onset of Modernity, animals have become symbols, artifacts, and mere objects – present only in comparison with humans. The departure from a local mentality towards a mass-produced, industrial philosophy caused the human-animal relationship to alter drastically, so much so that “every tradition which had previously mediated between man and nature was broken” (Berger, “Animals as Metaphor” 514). Within Modernity, the non-human animal is either marginalized or humanized; the animal as *animal* has disappeared, hidden behind the bars of a zoo, food packaging, or domestication. Humans now fail to acknowledge the independent animal as a fixture of life and we now regard “animals...with a shock of novelty” (Atkins 266). It seems, then, that animals are no longer an interconnected aspect of survival, but are trapped within the constraints of Modernity, as symbols, objects, tools, and machines for humans to gaze at and use.

In this thesis, I examine the function of the non-human animal in Sylvia Plath’s work. While animal images are a common presence in Plath’s work, they rarely maintain their own *animal identity*. Instead, they tend to function as poetic machines for Plath’s exploration of gender relations.¹ Utilizing animal images enables Plath the chance not only to explore conventional representations of gender, but also, by challenging the traditionally associated gender of animals, to disrupt these engrained roles. Since her death in 1963, critics and biographers alike have studied Plath’s uses and representations

¹ Descartes established the idea of animal as machine (*Discourse in Method: and Other Writings*, Part V 23-33).

of gender within both her life and her writing; however, rarely is her work addressed for the way in which she employs non-human animal images.

While animals are a clear and consistent presence in her writing, the construction and function of these non-human images is continually altering, complicating their symbolic meanings. Through my examination of Plath's work and her treatment of animals, I have distinguished two general ways in which the non-human figures function. Initially, Plath employs animals to negotiate the male-female relationship. This relationship is depicted in a triangular way, where the non-human animal acts as a point of connection between the speaker (typically female) and the male figure. Through the poetic animal, Plath negotiates the roles of each of the human figures. However, beginning around October 1962, when the Plath-Hughes marriage began to disintegrate, the prominent male figure begins to dissipate and the function of the animal alters. In these later poems, Plath employs the non-human figures to search for and define a revised, more autonomous feminine identity. However, while there is a clear modification in the function of the animal figures from Plath's early to later poetry, this trajectory is uneven and not invariably consistent. As I have introduced them, these two "categories" may seem straightforward, but as is evident in the animal representations in "All the Dead Dears," "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor," "Wuthering Heights," and "Blue Moles," where the protagonist is left alienated from the animals, Plath's symbolic non-human representations include many complexities and inconsistencies.

Ted Hughes

While my primary focus is on Plath's poetry, I do refer to particular aspects of her biography and correlate these with her work. Although I want to avoid too much biographical reading, inevitably the subject matter of this thesis brings into focus the

figure of her husband and fellow poet, Ted Hughes. Plath met Hughes in February 1956, while attending Cambridge on a Fulbright Scholarship. From their marriage, four months after their first meeting, until their separation in October 1962, they maintained a close, collaborative, working relationship, as constant influences on each other's writing (Middlebrook xv). Although it is clear from her journals, letters, and poetic style, that Plath had multiple influences throughout her career, no one was more influential on her writing than Hughes.² Hughes consistently used non-human animal images in his writing, and became arguably one of the most influential and successful of animal poets. When Plath and Hughes met, she was immediately fascinated with his use of poetic animals. In a letter to her mother, Aurelia, Plath writes of Hughes, "he knows all about the habits of animals and takes me amid cows and coots. I am writing poems, and they are better and stronger than anything I have ever done" (April 19, 1956, *LH* 234). For Plath, growing up in suburban America, Nature, in Hughes's sense, was virtually unknown to her until she met him. He opened her mind up to a new realm, teaching her how to discover it through writing. Under his influence, Plath's poetry altered, as it began to draw strength "from the vocabulary of woods and animals and earth" (Plath, letter to Aurelia, April 21, 1956, *LH* 235).

Because of his immense influence on her work as well as his continual inclusion of animals, I will refer to poems by Hughes throughout my study of Plath. However, these excursions will be brief and pursued only with the purpose of providing greater insight into Plath's own poems. While Hughes's poetry differs greatly from Plath's, specifically in the ways in which his animals negotiate gender roles, comparing his use with Plath's will allow for a deeper analysis of her work. Including a male poet,

² According to Margaret Uroff, Plath was influenced by the work of "[W.H.] Auden when he was making a tour of American college campuses in the 1950s; of Wallace Stevens, whose academic reputation was at its peak when she was in college; of Marianne Moore, whom she interviewed for *Mademoiselle*" (36). Later in her career, Plath became influenced by "Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, and shortly after that [Theodore] Roethke's poems" (Uroff 36).

especially one considered to embody a certain style of masculinity, will also allow for an identification of potential gender differences in writing the animal, in terms of the animals chosen and the actual act of constructing poetry around them.

For Plath, Hughes represented the traditional embodiment of masculinity. Upon first meeting him, she describes him as a “big, dark, hunky boy” (Plath, *LH* 112). Even within his writing, Hughes emits potent masculinity. In *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, Margaret Dickie Uroff claims that Hughes’s main poetic themes, specifically in *The Hawk in the Rain*, are “sex, lust, [and] violence” (42). Toby Miller explains that traditional masculine characteristics typically include violence and competitiveness or a desire to dominate, and goes on to argue that “white male sexuality [is] isomorphic with power” (115-117). Therefore, in terms of these traditional ideologies of masculinity, Hughes’s use of “sex, lust [and] violence” concurs with his overtly masculine presence.

For Hughes, even the method of writing poetry took on a stereotypically masculine characteristic. In a 1961 BBC broadcast, he explained his poetic writing process, describing

...the special kind of excitement, the slightly mesmerized and quite involuntary concentration with which you make out the stirrings of a new poem in your mind [...]. This is hunting and the poem is a new species of creature, a new specimen of the life outside your own. (qtd. in Clark 105)

For Plath, according to Susan Van Dyne, “making babies and making poems are persistent metaphors for each other” (6), whereas for Hughes, writing a poem was a hunt, a challenge to capture the wild and unknown. While Plath’s poetic process evokes the feminine role of life-giver, Hughes embodies the mentality of pursuit and capture. As Charles Bergman argues in “Obits for the Fallen Hunter,” “the hunter-as-symbol is heavily involved in discourses of masculine identity...[and hunting] has typically been an overwhelmingly masculine activity” (819). Hughes considered the “primitive impulse”

felt by animals to be similar to the feelings of the poet (Middlebrook 78). In a similar way that the hunter must learn the best method to capture a wild animal, according to Hughes's philosophy, a successful writer must also learn how to capture language and control it through the creative process. Throughout his poetry, he continually returns to the framework of the hunt by employing various animal representations and including the functionality of violence and aggression.

Growing up in the country, Hughes acknowledged all aspects of the natural world at an early age. Living *within* nature, he understood violence as an intricate and unavoidable aspect of it, a "fact of life that exists as the connecting link between all creatures" (Ries 92-93), and believed that the "animal world" could be "used to gain great insight into violence" in the "human world" (Ries 93). According to Keith Sagar, Hughes believed that "Nature cannot be subdivided . . . [because] if you reject the violence and ugliness, you must also reject the creative energies and the beauty" (14). For Hughes, the "violence" and the "creative energies" are inseparable.

Throughout his poetic career, Hughes was constantly studying "psychological, moral, social and religious symbolism derived from ancient mythologies" and integrating them into his work (Hirschberg 9). One of Hughes's most intense interests was in Shamanism, and he continually applied this to his own poetic endeavors, believing that the relationship he had with his poetic animals was not unlike the relationship between a Shaman and an animal. According to Stuart Hirschberg, the Shaman believes that in identifying with the non-human animal, a man can essentially transcend his present state and become something far greater and stronger (11). Because the Shaman maintains the utmost respect for the animal, associating with it is "not a *regression* into animal life," but the assumption of a "superhero image of being" (Hirschberg 11). Hughes continued

to maintain this mode of thinking throughout his life, firmly believing that “his” animals guided him through the poetic process.

For both Hughes and Plath, mythic animals are frequently in the foreground. However, unlike Plath’s, Hughes’s representations of human characters’ presence are “often drastically reduced, limited and dissociated” (Hirshberg 11). Where Plath commonly uses the animal image to define the identity and place of the human, Hughes’s animals tend to function independently of human influence. Hughes typically remains an observer, trying poetically to capture characteristics of the animal *as animal*. Plath uses animals in an entirely different way, preferring to adopt the animal as a mask for her speaker to speak through — that is, as a method of exploring human identity. Although it is not her intention, such a procedure tends to elide their *animalness*. Unlike Hughes, who tends to sympathize with the animal, Plath simply uses them as characters in her poetic plot. In this way, the animals themselves are displaced. One of Hughes’s most recognized animal images is his fox, from “The Thought-Fox.” Here, Hughes employs the fox to guide him through the poetic process; however, as Craig Robinson explains in *Ted Hughes as Shepherd of Being*, “the fox is not just an analogy for the poetic process: it remains a real fox, and the poem a bringing of the reality of outer nature into the inner world of poet and reader” (23). While the human may utilize the animal, it maintains a certain element of “realness.” Unlike many of Plath’s animals, commonly displaced from their natural habitat, typically entering into the domestic sphere, Hughes’s typically remain in their “animal element.”

Although, as Margaret Atwood comments in *Survival*, poems that include non-human elements are “often dismissed as being mere Nature poetry” (49), the representation of these elements in the work of both Plath and Hughes reveals sophisticated purposes. Atwood believes that a primary reason for the common dismissal

of “Nature poetry” is that it is typically regarded as *merely* exploring the natural environment (49). However, she argues that this drastically over-simplifies the genre, and concludes that “landscapes in poems are often interior landscapes; they are maps of a state of mind” (Atwood 49). While Hughes may focus on the *real* representation of an animal, it is obvious that Plath’s animals are not merely present for observation, but rather in the service of deeper explorations, as windows into the relationships between humans and animals and men and women.

Gender and Identity

In “Ambiguity and Alienation in *The Second Sex*,” Toril Moi, referring to Simone de Beauvoir’s work on gender, asserts that “social practices, not biology, encourage little girls to remain sunk in passivity and narcissism, and force little boys to become active subjects” (110). Unlike the sex of an individual, gender is culturally constructed. Growing up in America during the 1950s, Plath faced strictly defined gender roles. After a social disruption during World War II, American gender roles became increasingly defined by a “sexual dimorphism so extreme that men and women might have been separate species” (Van Dyne 69).³ Post-war American society placed particular emphasis on “traditional values of home and family” (Moen, Dempster-McClain, & Walker 566). Women were encouraged to remain in the home, bearing and raising the children, while men maintained a more active role as the breadwinners and sole providers for their families.

The gender roles engrained in American culture also affected ideas of sexuality, once again socially dividing male and female. In a way, a woman’s sexuality belonged to men; while “men should work hard to please their wives...women should labor to remain

³ Post WWII gender constructions were strongly influenced by an American uptake of Freudianism (Van Dyne 69).

sexually attractive” to their husbands (Van Dyne 69). Media outlets, particularly women’s magazines, were “full of advice to the housekeeper on the art of preserving her sexual attractiveness while washing dishes [and] of continuing to be well dressed during pregnancy” (de Beauvoir 553). For Plath, the definition of a “sexually normal woman” was “naturally passive in disposition and exclusively procreative in ambition,” while the “unmarried career woman was not merely pitiably unfulfilled but dangerous, a menacing man-imitator” (Van Dyne 69). Therefore, the “perfect woman” was essentially a sexually passive domestic wife, satisfied in relying on her husband and relinquishing her personal ambitions to be anything other than a wife and mother. As a well-educated writer, Plath had difficulty in fully accepting just one role to define her identity. Throughout her life, as well as within her poetry, Plath constantly returns to what Van Dyne calls her “twin goals” of “becoming a famous poet *and* a perfect mother” (emphasis added 144). In doing this, Plath was laboring “against cultural myths and family scripts that defined female self-expression as most perfectly realized in the domestic drama of child-rearing” (Van Dyne 144).

Because Plath struggled to uphold both roles, as a domestic figure and successful female writer, she constantly displays ambivalence towards each of these predetermined positions. Judith Gardiner argues that “the problems of female identity presented in women’s poetry and prose are rarely difficulties in knowing one’s gender; more frequently, they are difficulties in learning how to respond to social rules for what being female means in our culture” (359). Because of the ambivalence shown toward socially constructed gender roles, Plath becomes what Alicia Ostriker calls a “revisionist mythmaker” (“The Thieves of Language” 72). Ostriker claims that when a poet takes on a “figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture” and alters it, they essentially revise the myth of that figure, and claim it for themselves, which is the case

with Plath and animals (“The Thieves of Language” 72).⁴ Because women and non-human animals share similar “places” within society, it seems only fitting that in exploring gender roles, Plath should employ animal images.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir explores the relationship between women and Nature, arguing that a girl “will devote a special love to Nature: still more than the adolescent boy, she worships it” (380). According to de Beauvoir, “Nature represents what woman herself represents for man: herself and her negation, a kingdom and a place of exile; the whole in the guise of the other” (745). For Plath, the traditional place of the woman – the domestic – represented both “a kingdom and a place of exile.” Even though throughout her life she expressed the desire to be the “perfect woman” as a successful wife and mother, she also feared that this could potentially harm her creative inspiration.⁵ Plath constantly faced the dilemma of whether to accept and fuel her creative self, thereby refusing domesticity, or accept the prescribed role for the conventional woman and strive to be the best wife and mother. Choosing either role meant risking isolation or “exile,” and in succumbing to one she risked alienation from the other. It is not until the conclusion of her career and the disintegration of her marriage with Hughes that she takes “possession of it [Nature],” and simultaneously “takes possession of herself” (de Beauvoir 380-381).

Animals and Gender

The rise of industrialization and capitalism intensified the association of women with nature, and men with society. As Barbara Noske explains, since the progression of modern culture and the conquest of nature is typically assumed to be driven by men,

⁴ Plath’s “revisionist mythmaking” is most easily recognized in her later poetry (the bee poems, “Ariel,” “Purdah,” and “Lady Lazarus”), all discussed in Chapter 3.

⁵ “The suburbs were responsible for breeding exaggerated gender role separation as the commuting husband left the full-time housewife to raise an increasing number of children largely alone” (Van Dyne 17).

women were increasingly associated with nature (102). Therefore, society began “devaluing whatever [was] associated with women, emotion, animals, nature, and the body while simultaneously elevating in value those things associated with men, reason, humans, culture, and the mind” (Gaard 5). Through this dichotomy, gender roles have become clearly defined by and associated with either culture or nature. The progress of Modernity has enabled patriarchy to “appropriate, penetrate, and control” Nature, thereby firmly identifying masculinity with this role of colonization and conquest, and femininity with the colonized and conquered (Noske 58). These human attributes are easily transferred onto particular non-human animal species, and through anthropomorphism, these animals acquire gender.⁶ Regardless of the particular sex of an animal, gendered pronouns are instantly attached. The active/passive dichotomy that commonly defines human gender also defines animal gender. Put simply, predatory animals are stereotypically associated with masculinity and prey animals with femininity.

Unlike Hughes’s animals, which typically maintain their own autonomy, Plath’s are consistently connected with human figures, and therefore lack any identity free from human influence. Plath’s animals appear in multiple forms and are employed in various functions throughout her work; however, through the association with the human, they are always gendered. In Plath’s earlier poetry, they take on traditional roles, upholding gender dichotomies as predator/prey or subject/object. Here, the animal is associated with either the male figure in the quest to destroy the female or the female figure as a victimized object. However, in Plath’s later work, the animal image becomes the protagonist’s agent, functioning as a poetic vehicle. As a vehicle, the non-human images

⁶ In its simplest terms, anthropomorphism is giving non-human objects, primarily animals, human qualities: feelings, emotions, actions, or physical characteristics.

begin to carry the protagonists towards revised definitions of masculinity and femininity, which in turn disrupt conventional notions of gender.⁷

Victims

One of the most prominent models for the human-animal relationship represented in Plath's work is the predator/prey dichotomy. According to Marian Scholtmeijer, the cultural relationship humankind has with animals is that of aggressor to victim (235). Because women share a similar position with animals, both considered Other by patriarchal Modernity, and both victimized, Scholtmeijer argues that female writers "can subvert the assumptions on which victimization is founded through allegiance with animals" (235). Essentially, by using the animal figure as a victim, the woman writer gains the ability not just to explore this status, but also to re-write the victimized position in potentially liberating ways.

In *Survival*, Atwood proposes what she calls the "Basic Victim Positions" of Canadian literature. Because, as she claims, Canadian literature is consistently about the "struggle to survive" (30), she considers the possibility that "Canada as a whole is a victim" (35). In a similar way that Canada has struggled against its own subordination to external colonizing forces (England, France, and the United States), Plath, in her concentration on gender, also confronts a "struggle to survive." With any typical story of a journey towards survival or rebirth, there must be an aggressor and a victim. Employing animal images allows Plath to fully explore this journey and acknowledge the obstacles to independent survival. Because Plath's poetry explores the role of the victim so often, Atwood's positions are crucial and will be referred to continually throughout my thesis.

⁷ Using the animal as a "vehicular form" is within the Romantic Tradition as defined by Northrop Frye; see below pp. 102.

Because, as Atwood argues, Canada is a “collective victim,” she constructs “Basic Victim Positions” to understand this role better (36). Atwood argues that “the positions are the same whether you are a victimized country, a victimized minority group or a victimized individual” (36). The following is a condensed version of these positions, describing the fundamental structure and general characteristics of each position.

“Position One: To deny the fact that you are a victim.”

Subjects in this position “are afraid to recognize they are victims for fear of losing the privileges they possess” (36). Atwood goes on to assert that “if anger is felt...it is likely to be directed against one’s fellow-victims, particularly those who try to talk about their victimization” (36). For subjects in Position One, “*the basic game*” is to ““deny your victim-experience”” (36).

“Position Two: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology (in the case of women, for instance), the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the Unconscious, or any other large general powerful idea.”

In Position Two, because it is “the fault of this large *thing* and not your own fault, you can neither be blamed for your position nor be expected to do anything about it” (37). Atwood explains that if a subject in this position resists, “your rebellion will be deemed foolish or evil even by you, and you will expect to lose and be punished, for who can fight Fate (or the Will of God, or Biology)?” (37). In Position Two, “*the basic game*” is “Victor/Victim” (37).

“Position Three: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable.”

Here, subjects ““stop seeing [themselves] as a *fated* Victim”” (37). They are able to “distinguish between the *role* of Victim...and the *objective experience* that is making [them] a victim” (38). Rather than the stasis of the first two positions, this one offers “a dynamic position” because “from it you can move on to Position Four” (38). For subjects in Position Three, “*the basic game*...is repudiating the Victim role” (38).

"Position Four: To be a creative non-victim"

According to Atwood, "Position Four is a position not for victims but for those who have never been victims at all, or for ex-victims" (38). In this position, "energy is no longer being suppressed" and "creative activity of all kinds becomes possible" (38). There is no "game" in Position Four since "Victor/Victim games are obsolete" and "you don't even have to concentrate on rejecting the role of Victim, because the role is no longer a temptation for you" (39).

The elements that make up these four victim positions help describe the transformation of Plath's protagonists. In her earlier poetry, the female figures are victims; their victimization is commonly depicted as an effect of the "dictates of biology" and accordingly they remain in that position. However, towards the end of her career, Plath's protagonists begin to identify with more active, and therefore more stereotypically masculine animal figures, which in turn alters their victim status, and enables them to reach "position four" as non-victims.

Identification

Because animals and women are considered Others, they are commonly victimized and marginalized, reduced to the function of objects. In Josephine Donovan's article, "Animal Rights and Feminist Theory," she writes, the "autonomy and objectivity of the male scientist reflects the basic dissociation from the feminine," thus reaffirming that through the connection between science, progress and culture, men have further distanced themselves from, and have in turn objectified, the feminine and the non-human (368). Theirs is essentially a humanist ideology, with an assumed "dignity and central position of human beings in the universe" (Abrams 116). Humanity, patriarchally

conceived, is valued and retains the role of the subject, while the non-human and the female is devalued and assigned the role of the object.

In "Empathy vs. Surrealism in Elizabeth Bishop's Animal Poems," Ernesto Suárez-Toste compares how Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson use the non-human animal. Whitman's animals "display an unprecedented energy and vitality, and the poet, in his pursuit of self-transcendence, is equally eager to join in their activity, to follow them into their medium, and merge with them in their natural environment" (Suárez-Toste 113). However, Dickinson's portrayal differs greatly, in that she uses small, passive animals that "are defamiliarized by close ups that focus on very specific features" (Suárez-Toste 113). In identifying the ways in which Plath utilizes animals, it is clear that her gender associations are similar to those of Whitman and Dickinson. Therefore, when Plath, like Dickinson, utilizes passive animals, the protagonist remains either victimized or alienated; however, when Plath follows Whitman's example, employing a virile horse as seen in "Ariel," the protagonist succeeds in transcendence.

Plath's Animal Representations

Plath's use and representation of animal images in her work typically falls into two distinct categories. In Chapter I, I identify how Plath utilizes the non-human animal to negotiate gender. In "Pursuit," "Zoo Keeper's Wife," "The Rabbit Catcher," and "Burning the Letters" the relationships between the male, female and poetic animal figures function triangularly. Through these poems, Plath discloses a traditional role of male-as-destroyer as the animal images enable the male figure to take on a fully predatory position. As seen in "Pursuit" and "Zoo Keeper's Wife," Plath's earlier poetry typically associates her animals with masculinity. Margaret Uroff argues that this is most likely due to the fact that Plath's first introduction to Nature was from Hughes (Uroff 77).

In the final negotiation within the male-female relationship, however, the animal begins to work as woman's agent. By negotiating the male-female relationship through the non-human, Plath reveals the predator/prey and subject/object dichotomies that typically uphold any conventional construction of gender. As these dichotomies surface, Atwood's victim positions also become applicable, as the female figures' roles consistently resemble the description of Atwood's victim position two.

In the work included in Chapter II the representation and the woman-as-victim role begins to alter. Here, I focus on the poems that move away from the triangular relationship. In her later work, Plath begins to utilize animals to explore her own identity, which according to Berger, has been central to the way in which humans have been creating their identity throughout history ("Animal World" 1042). While she continues to negotiate gender relationships, she is no longer trying to settle herself into a domestic role as a wife and mother; however, this does not guarantee a positive, revised feminine identity. In the first part of this chapter, I focus on the poems where the association with the animal leaves the protagonist with an alienated identity, thereby disrupting the stereotypical connection between women and animals. However, in the final section, Plath's animals act as "vehicular forms" and are utilized to bring the protagonists towards a triumphant sense of feminine identity, thereby moving out of Atwood's position two and into position four, as a non-victim. However, this transcendence is complicated because typically her protagonists are most successful in attaining autonomous identities when they connect with "masculine" animals, therefore negating a complete feminine transformation.

Although Plath utilizes non-human animals often, they have, to return to Berger's claim, vanished as independent animals and are present only as objects or machines. Because the non-human is used to either explore human relationships or provide

transcendence and non-victim status, Plath does not offer a positive literary example of “animal politics.” Instead, she seems to have minimal regard for the animalness of the non-human, utilizing it only to further an understanding of humans. However, in saying this, Plath’s use of the non-human allows her not just to explore the social construction of gender dichotomies but to challenge them, as is evident in the final poems that present a revised feminine identity.

Chapter I

Negotiating Violent Undercurrents

One of the functions of non-human animals in Plath's writing is to negotiate gender roles within a male/female relationship. In this chapter, I focus particularly on "Pursuit," "Zoo Keeper's Wife," "The Rabbit Catcher," and "Burning the Letters," and on the way in which the symbolic animal is employed to dramatize the functions of violence, sexuality, and ambivalence within a traditionally gendered relationship. The male figure takes on various roles through his affiliation with the non-human animal: he is either the animal-as-predator or the destroyer of animals. The female, on the other hand, typically takes on a victim role; however, in "Burning the Letters" and in the short story, "The Fifty-Ninth Bear," animals are her agents, and work towards destroying the male figure. The relationship between male, female, and non-human functions in a triangular manner, whereby the animal is the connecting point and the roles and actions of each being affects the others. Because the animal image plays this mediating role, it is never presented on its own right, but always appears in relation to the gendered human relationship.

For Plath, the animal becomes a way to explore many of the gender issues she faced within her own life. Through poetry, Plath reveals female ambivalence towards the traditional construction and roles of "ideal" masculinity, domesticity, and female sexuality. Although much Plath criticism (focusing primarily on her later work) affiliates her with feminism, she never personally aligned herself with a feminist ideology. In fact, throughout her life she continued to maintain strong ambivalence towards the "traditional" constructions of femininity: at times, she fully embraced aspects of feminine ideology such as domesticity, and at other times during her life, she refused them. It is

through non-human animal images that Plath is able to explore gender constructions externally, and perhaps, through literary representation, breathe life into some of her fantasies as an intellectual, American woman in the 1950s. While I do want to limit the amount of influence Plath's biography has on my analysis, it is undeniable that many of the dynamics between male and female figures Plath presents, closely resemble the relationship between herself and Hughes.

Although my primary focus throughout this chapter is on Plath's own poetry, because the biographical link is so evident within these particular pieces, incorporating specific poems written by Hughes will enable a full exploration of the function of non-human animals as tools to negotiate roles within a male/female relationship. While most of the Hughes poems that I incorporate were written at approximately the same time as Plath's, Hughes's "The Rabbit Catcher" and "Epiphany," both written at the end of his career and well after Plath's death, will also be used. Hughes's "The Rabbit Catcher" is particularly useful in that he seems to respond directly to elements of Plath's poem of the same title. Including Hughes's poetry not only provides a masculine example of "animal poetry," but also presents a valuable look into the relationship between Plath and Hughes as writers, which also allows for a more balanced representation of the non-human in correlation with gender.

The animals used in both Plath's and Hughes's poetics acknowledge the presence of the traditional societal representation of masculinity and femininity. Throughout these poems, Plath constructs common scenarios of violence and victimization, which are seemingly straightforward, but when thrown together with gender and sex, become complicated. Within Plath's poetry, there is a continual shifting of power between male and female and in the ownership of agency within the sexual realm. The non-human animal images used demonstrate this sliding of agency between the two genders. By

employing the animal image, Plath reveals the complexity of gender roles within a male/female relationship. Although the traditional gender roles may be easily socially distinguishable, Plath addresses the more complex undercurrents of these relations. By employing a non-human animal image, Plath distinguishes a predator/prey dichotomy within gendered relationships. Aggression, violence and consumption are all typically associated with masculinity; whereas the male is the survivor, the predatory victor, the female dies in the prey role (Libby 387). According to de Beauvoir, "it is required of woman that in order to realize her femininity she must make herself object and prey, which is to say that she must renounce her claims as sovereign subject" (716). It is in these typical constructions of gender that the predator/prey dichotomy, commonly seen in the animal realm, is humanized and used as the primary model for defining gender.

While the predator/prey dichotomy is the main animal model to distinguish characteristics belonging to femininity or masculinity, the dichotomy between "wild" and "tame" also constructs similar gender roles. According to Karen Davis in her article "Thinking Like a Chicken: Farm Animals and the Feminine Connection," "animals that provide images of 'natural, wild, and free' accord with the 'masculine' spirit of adventure and conquest idolized by our culture" (196); therefore men tend to "identify with the 'wild' and not the 'tame'" (197). Men are able to identify with the unrestrained and the wild because they themselves can attain that position. On the other hand, women have continued to be considered domesticated, traditionally occupying the role of nurturer of the home and bearer of the children. Therefore, women have difficulty attaining or identifying with the wild or unrestrained image because their own history has been typically controlled and restrained. Because women are historically bound to domesticity, only docile or domestic animals are traditionally associated with the feminine.

Unlike the sex of a person, gender is a cultural construction and “is determined by cultural expectations, divisions, relations, discourse, perception and embedded beliefs” (Colebrook 13). Growing up in America in the 1950s, Plath was subject to the typical construction of the “domestic woman.” In *“Just a Housewife”: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America*, Glenna Matthews asserts that “Americans tied a heightened appreciation of home to an ideology of sex roles in which women were seen as by nature more gentle, more loving, and more willing to sacrifice than men” (34). Because of these “womanly characteristics” it was socially determined that women should stay in the home, raising children, while men take on the role of the provider and sole breadwinner for the family. Throughout Plath’s career, she addresses these roles with a sense of ambivalence. On the one hand, she works at fulfilling the duties of the conventional 1950s domestic American woman, wanting to be a good wife and mother. On the other hand, as a well-educated woman, she has difficulty accepting this traditional role as a dominated, passive female with her primary function in the home. Plath straddles the gender lines, wanting to utilize characteristics and roles of both genders in becoming a wife and mother as well as a famous and well-respected poet.

Plath’s real-life ambivalence towards gender dichotomies is replicated in her poetry, where the positions she adopts in dealing with female violence and victimization are often contradictory. However, this is not necessarily a failing. In *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, Jacqueline Rose addresses Plath’s contradictions, asserting:

Plath is not consistent. It has been the persistent attempt to impose a consistency on her which has been so damaging – whether as diagnosis or celebration of her work. But to say that Plath is not consistent is not to say that she does not articulate something very precise about some of the most difficult points of contestation in our contemporary cultural and political life. (10)

While Plath may be contradictory in relation to particular aspects of “cultural and political life,” Rose argues that “she writes at the point of tension – pleasure/danger, your fault/my fault, high/low culture – without resolution or dissipation of what produces the clash between the two” (10). Representations of gender are often simplified, presenting two positions – completely feminine and completely masculine; however, as witnessed in Plath’s poetry (and fiction), gender is much too complex to be circumscribed by these two positions.

Male: Predatory Animal

Unlike some of Plath’s later poems where the female identifies with a powerful animal and journeys towards non-victim empowerment, the female figure represented in “Pursuit” remains both a human and a victim. The male figure, represented as a panther, takes on the animal-as-predator role, and hunts for female prey to fulfill his sexual “craving” (Plath, *CP* 22). The presence of a predatory animal is immediately associated with the male figure, thereby implicitly presenting a female-as-victim. By including a predatory animal, Plath anthropomorphizes the instinctual nature of the predator, correlating it with the sexual meeting/stalk between two individuals. In several of Plath’s early poems “violence or victimization... is part of nature” (Rosenblatt, “SP: Drama of Initiation” 33). Existing as “part of nature” implies a naturalness in the violence or victimization, which translates into acceptance. Because “violence or victimization” is typically aimed towards women, this representation of a predatory male is in keeping with traditional representations of gender roles.

“Pursuit,” composed shortly after Plath met Hughes, addresses the instinctual sexual attraction and lust she felt existed between them (Hayman 94). While it is clear that there was instant sexual attraction between the two, there was also violence, a link

represented in many of the poems that refer to their relationship. In the following excerpt from Plath's journal, from an entry written after her first meeting with Hughes, it is clear how interconnected sexual desire and violence are:

...and I was stamping and he was stamping on the floor, and then he kissed me bang smash on the mouth [and ripped my hairband off, my lovely red hairband scarf which has weathered sun and much love, and whose like I shall never find again, and my favourite silver earrings: hah, I shall keep, he barked.] And when he kissed my neck I bit him long and hard on the cheek, and when we came out of the room, blood was running down his face. [His poem 'I did it, I.' Such violence, and I can see how women lie down for artists. The one man in the room who was as big as his poems, huge, with hulk and dynamic chunks of words; his poems are strong and blasting like a high wind in steel girders.] And I screamed in myself, thinking: oh, to give myself crashing, fighting, to you. (Milford, qtd. in Rose 121)

Due to the absence of Plath's unabridged journal at the time Rose published *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, she relies on Nancy Milford's review entitled, "The Journals of Sylvia Plath," where Milford focuses on the missing pieces of Plath's original journals.⁸ This excerpt is from Milford's review of McCullough's edition of the Journals, which includes the content edited out of Plath's original journal through the publishing process.

As Rose aptly points out, it is Hughes's actions that have been omitted in the editing process, thereby eliminating half of the experience of their initial meeting (121). With the editorial cuts restored, "the violence of the first moment (her bite for his theft) is . . . echoed in the second, where what she desires, what is exchanged between them, is 'huge' . . . that first exchange of violence leads directly to the second and is inseparable from it" (122). In this first moment of meeting, there is a collision of traditional gender characteristics and boundaries. Here, Plath takes on both a feminine and a masculine role. She acknowledges Hughes as "the one man who was as big as his poems, huge, with

⁸ *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* edited by Karen V. Kukil was published in 2000.

hulk” and entirely masculine, and goes on to identify with other women who “lie down for artists,” sacrificing themselves. The self-sacrifice and fascination with Hughes’s excessively masculine body attests to Plath’s traditional notions of gender; to this extent, she effectively buys into a stereotypical role. His “hulk” implies a power and dominance that not only fascinates her, but also upholds traditional gender constructions. As Diane Middlebrook attests, Plath “preferred the looks and manners of a he-man,” maintaining an acute fascination with the archetypal all-powerful male figure (17). However, Plath’s violent actions towards Hughes complicate this initial sentiment towards an overtly masculine man.

This initial meeting between Plath and Hughes begins with a kiss; however this kiss is a “bang smash on the mouth” – a violent kiss. Following the kiss, Hughes takes her headband, and makes an aggressive “bark[ing]” demand. The kiss and theft confirm the agency of the male figure, with Hughes maintaining the control by enforcing a kiss and then removing something from Plath, only to finalize his dominance by barking, like a dog, “I shall keep.” Is Hughes merely taking the headband or, combined with his kiss and his demand, claiming her as his keepsake?

Plath, however, responds with violence herself, and in an attempt to regain some of the power, bites him on the cheek. Animalistic instincts take over, as he “barks” and she bites, and there is the sense of an uncontrollable mixture of sexual desire and aggression. In terms of the violence of the two genders, Plath’s bite exhibits the most aggression as blood runs down his face. Through violence, she has broken the skin and entered inside, claiming power for herself, in a manner not traditionally considered feminine. Although this is the end of the “real” action, with Plath in the dominant position, she continues to internalize the experience and has a desire to give herself “crashing, fighting” to Hughes, reaffirming her connection to both feminine and

masculine identities. She has a craving to become a sacrifice, a typically “feminine” position; however, her sacrifice will be “crashing, fighting,” implying violence, which preserves a “masculine” sentiment, maintaining her ambivalence towards typical representations of gender.

For Plath, Hughes was a “big, dark, hunky boy” (Plath, *J* 112), god-like, representing “perfection of body and soul” (Uroff 70). Even though there is a sense of violence and immensity about Hughes, alluding to the possibility of danger, Plath remains fascinated.⁹ This translates into the female’s fascination with the panther in “Pursuit.” The ambivalence of the female speaker is such that, even when hunted, even when her life is threatened, she remains fascinated and, like Plath wanting to give herself to Hughes, is willing to sacrifice herself to quench the panther’s sexual hunger.

For Plath, violent forces in her poetry are both “attractive and repulsive” (Ries 39). Rose illustrates this dichotomy through a journal entry from prior to Plath’s meeting Hughes where she reflects upon a “male embrace from a sexual encounter” (123). Once again, an exchange of violence and power, and a shift in gender positioning, are apparent. There is an initial masculine force, followed by her resistance and protest, ending in “hurting good” (Rose 123-124). This underlying sexual exchange points to the emergence of that feminine sexual aggression that can be seen in much of her poetry. In “Pursuit,” Plath utilizes the animal image to explore the violence between male and female present within the sexual sphere. Through the relationship between the speaker and animal, Plath presents the ambivalent, even masochistic exchange between woman and man during the sexual encounter. Like Plath’s journal entry, “Pursuit” also begins with force, as the male stalks the female, followed by her distaste at his actions, as she continues to flee his advances. However, towards the conclusion, she succumbs to his stalk, sacrificing her

⁹ According to many who knew Hughes, he was “‘the biggest seducer in Cambridge’ – it was chief gossip about Hughes at the time Sylvia Plath met him” (Middlebrook 6).

heart to “quench his thirst” (Plath, *CP* 23). To the female figure the sexual aggression exerted by the masculine panther is both frightening and thrilling.

From the beginning, the speaker acknowledges herself as a victim when she proclaims, “There is a panther [that] stalks me down” (Plath, *CP* 22). This panther is male, evident in the use of the pronoun “him” in the second line, immediately constructing a gender division, as well as establishing a traditional predator/prey relationship. The male figure in this poem, then, is represented by a predatory animal known for its force and power, as well as its ability to lure other animals to their own destruction (Rowland 132).¹⁰ In utilizing a predatory animal, Plath portrays the sexual as instinctual, an unavoidable desire in need of fulfillment, thereby confirming stereotypical representations of men and women.

Although the female remains human, because the male figure is represented by an animal, directing predatory impulses towards her, she in turn resembles prey — flesh whose function is merely to be consumed. In her poem, “Totem,” written seven years after “Pursuit,” Plath returns to the association between gender and consumption as the speaker traces the meat eating processes (Uroff 154). Here, she addresses patriarchal progress, and the outcome — that everything “will be eaten nevertheless” — produces a hopeless sentiment towards patriarchal advancement (Plath, *CP* 264). In “Totem,” according to Uroff, Plath domesticates the “violence of history...in the eating habits of men” (Uroff 154). At the conclusion of “Totem,” the idea of consumption is purely frightening (Rosenblatt, “SP: Drama of Initiation” 26); but in “Pursuit,” Plath is still exploring the potential ambivalence connected with consumption.

Through “Pursuit,” Plath presents the sexual act, not just in terms of desire, but also as an instinct, a need and quest for food. Although the connection between women

¹⁰ Due to the panther’s variegated coat, it has the ability to lure other animals in, therefore commonly charged with deceit. The breath of the panther is also thought to be a device to allure, smelling sweet and attracting animals in order to destroy them (Rowland 132).

and meat has existed for centuries, and has frequently been included in literature and popular culture, aligning the male with a predatory animal that must prey on the female for food emphasizes the element of sexual consumption.¹¹ It is in the exchange of meat between the two figures that the female victim accentuates her ambivalence, becoming masochistic.

Even though the speaker flees from her pursuer as he “set[s] the woods aflame” and “ransacks the land” in quest of “his starving body’s bait,” she continually validates his stalking through the assumption that it is instinctual (Plath, *CP* 22). In “License to Kill: An Ecofeminist Critique of Hunter’s Discourse,” Marti Kheel examines the instinctual difference between human and nonhuman hunters, stating, “animals who hunt do so for reasons of survival; in contrast to humans, most predators would not survive without meat” (96). By combining the images of man and panther, Plath blurs the reasons for the hunt as it becomes part instinctual and part sexual. Therefore, in the words of Peter Steeves, “sex, death and dinner are inevitably woven together” (159). For both the human male and the panther, the female is to be consumed, a sexual object as well as a piece of “meat” that “must glut his mouth’s raw wound” (Plath, *CP* 22). Once again, there is an ambivalence surrounding the speaker and her reaction to her pursuer. Suggesting that the panther’s mouth is a “raw wound” implies that it needs healing, and the only thing that will heal it is the female, again implying an acceptance of the panther’s violent actions. In the same way that instinct functions as a need, so too does the necessity to heal his mouth with her body.

In Hughes’s “The Dove Breeder” (1957), he too turns to the representation of a predatory animal to explore the instinctual nature that takes over when a human is faced with love. “The Dove Breeder” expounds upon the lack of control one has when love

¹¹ Carol J. Adams has written extensively on this connection in *The Pornography of Meat* and *The Sexual Politics of Meat*.

strikes "Like a hawk into a dovecote" (Hughes 26). In the same way that Plath presents the male-female relationship in "Pursuit," Hughes explores the violent, involuntary nature of the sexual relationship in "The Dove Breeder." According to Leonard M. Scigaj, the hawk that attacks the dove breeder's birds "embodies the fierce charge of sensuality that sweeps through the dove breeder when an extraordinary experience of love crashes into his carefully constructed public image" (*Ted Hughes* 30). Initially, "the mild-mannered dove-breeder" resists this predatory assault and "Shriek[s] at the raider;" however, by the conclusion of the poem, the predatory force of eroticism, represented in the image of the hawk, proves too strong (Hughes 26). As a predator, the hawk's attack on the doves is instinctual, once more illustrating sex as instinct, a predatory need, thereby validating the possible violence and disruption it may cause. By the conclusion of "The Dove Breeder," the breeder accepts the sexual instinct as he "rides the morning mist / With a big-eyed hawk on his fist" (Hughes 26). In becoming a falconer, he not only accepts the predatory nature of the animal figure, but through its agency also takes on the role of hunter himself.

Like the hawk, the panther in "Pursuit" is "hauled by love" as his quest for meat becomes increasingly sexualized (Plath, *CP* 22). The "Charred and ravaged women lie" in his wake, confirming his masculine dominance over them. He cries, "blood, let blood be spilt" as "His ardor snares [her]" (Plath, *CP* 22-23). The speaker becomes aware of his passion and of his "taut thighs" as he threatens her existence (Plath, *CP* 23). Similar to the tightening of the phallus prior to intercourse, the panther's thighs tighten in preparation for the slaughter of a prey animal. According to Kheel, "just as the male orgasm typically is seen as the denouement to the act of sex, so too, the death...is seen as

the narrative resolution of the hunt" (91). Therefore, the hunt is only resolved when the female is sexually consumed and the male has his death through orgasm.¹²

The "Charred and ravened women lie" as "bait," victims of the panther's quest for fulfillment. The implications of the word "bait" and the relationship the women and panther have to it complicate the women's position as "bait." Typically, bait refers to either harassment or food used to lure or entice prey. In this case, the women represent food, working to lure or entice the panther, therefore acting as passive subjects. Although they entice him, they do not actively seek to do so; in this sense, they remain passive. Furthermore, when "bait" is placed alongside "Charred and ravened women," it becomes victimized. The sexual predator is in control as the women, "*Become his starving body's bait*" (emphasis added, Plath, *CP* 22). The women do not actively bait the panther; as the predator, he assigns them that role.

This relationship changes, however, when the focus turns towards the speaker, as she realizes the threat of becoming bait herself. Here, there is a dual enticement occurring. While the panther is instinctively drawn to the speaker in a quest to fulfill his need, she is equally drawn, although not admittedly, by the lure of the panther's prowess. The protagonist's reaction to seeing the "Charred and ravened women" as "bait" is also complicated, challenging a typical response. While recognizing that she too may become his "bait," she does not feel disgusted or frightened but strangely placid, perhaps fascinated, reaffirming his allure. The reaction that the speaker has towards these other female victims problematizes her role as a passive subject. Even though she realizes that they have been his bait (although passively), luring him to consume them, she is ambivalent towards this and in realizing the instinctual need the panther has in consuming her, accepts her role as bait, which in turn will lead to her own demise.

¹² An orgasm is sometimes referred to as a "little death."

In *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, Uroff recognizes that even though the male hunts her, “she describes him in exalted terms” (69). Although she continues to flee the panther’s pursuit, she also derives a “peculiar thrill...from the panther that pursues her to the death” (Uroff 69). In a manner evocative of Plath’s initial feelings for Hughes, the panther “prowls more lordly than the sun” as his “voice waylays [her]” (Plath, *CP* 22-23). According to Uroff, this may be part of what Judith Kroll describes as a “fascist sensibility” and a “desire to be controlled by an all-powerful figure of force,” thereby upholding traditional notions of the male as dominating and powerful and the female as controlled and passive (Uroff 69). Therefore, although the female figure remains a victim, her “desire” to remain so complicates this role.

According to Atwood, a subject who understands her victim status in this way must inevitably remain in the second position because she attributes that status, as a woman, to “the dictates of biology” (37). Atwood observes that “since it is the fault of this large *thing* and not your own fault, you can neither be blamed for your position nor be expected to do anything about it” (37). For the speaker in “Pursuit,” there is no expectation of being able to fight against her own victimization (which would be “deemed foolish,” according to Atwood) and move above her present status (37). In accepting it, she submits to a biological determinism.

By the conclusion of the poem, the panther seems to be gaining on her, and “On fluent haunches, keeps [her] speed” (Plath, *CP* 23). For the speaker, being consumed seems unavoidable; accepting it, she actively “hurl[s]” her heart to “quench his thirst,” choosing to make a self-sacrifice (Plath, *CP* 23). De Beauvoir argues that women’s

sado-masochistic aberrations involve a basic insincerity: if the girl lets herself practice them, it means that she accepts, through her repudiation, the womanly future in store for her; she would not mutilate her flesh with hatred if she had not first recognized herself as flesh. (373)

Because the protagonist in "Pursuit" actively "hurl[s]" her heart, she accepts this position, thereby objectifying herself as she too identifies her body as mere flesh or meat. Even though she surrenders part of her self, he "Compels a total sacrifice" (Plath, *CP* 23). For the panther, her "heart" is not sufficient and he requires her entirety. For the panther to reach sexual fulfillment, she must sacrifice her entire being. Sexual consumption is essentially an all-encompassing endeavor, requiring the consumption of everything she has. In the discussion of her second victim position, Atwood addresses self-harm or self-sacrifice, stating that "anger, when present – or scorn, since everyone in the category is defined as inferior – is directed against both fellow-victims and oneself" (37). Therefore, it is not only the desire and quest to heal the panther, but also her inner turmoil at the panther's pursuit that is responsible for her final act of victimized acceptance. She never denies his request, never denies her victimization; instead, she is "Appalled by secret want" and must "shut [her] doors on that dark guilt" (Plath, *CP* 23). The "hunt" fully enters the sexual sphere as the panther enters the domestic and threatens her at her door. In the final two stanzas, Plath fully addresses the speaker's masochism as her position divides on whether or not she should accept the panther's sexual advances.

Even though she feels a "dark guilt," her desire for him is unavoidable, willing her to make the ultimate sacrifice for him. De Beauvoir argues that for young girls there is a "desire to be dominated," and that "masochism, according to some psychoanalysts, is one of woman's characteristics, and it is this tendency that enables her to adapt herself to her erotic destiny" (418). Therefore, the ambivalence that the protagonist displays is an aspect of her identity as a woman. As "The panther's tread is on the stairs" the female's "Blood quickens, gonging in [her] ears" (Plath, *CP* 23). There is a sense of both terror and excitement in this moment. Rose argues that "in the process of objecting she recognizes in herself, not just the desire for the man's freedom – the voluntarism of

independence and greater assertion of will – but an involuntary slippage, an identification with his sexual pleasure of fantasy” (117). Perhaps by succumbing to the panther’s sexual pursuit and offering herself up for sexual consumption she will fulfill some underlying sexual fantasy and unleash her own sexual pleasure. During the 1950s, the double standard prevailed, whereby women were socially expected to remain virgins until marriage, but men were allowed many more sexual freedoms (Middlebrook 39).¹³ Plath was plagued with the desire to experience sexual pleasure in the context of the social taboos that prohibited it. By the conclusion of “Pursuit” however, the speaker begins to identify with the male predator’s sexual pleasure and potency: her “Blood quickens” as the inevitability of sexual consumption becomes increasingly apparent (Plath, *CP* 23).

Through the construction of a predatory male hunting a feminine victim, Plath successfully explores the complexities of these socially pre-determined gender roles. While the poem’s portrayal of the male figure is in keeping with stereotypical representations of masculine violence and potent sexuality, the speaker’s “feminine” position is complicated by the masochism evident in her desire to be violently, sexually consumed.

Male: Destroyer of Animals

In both “Zoo Keeper’s Wife” (1961) and “The Rabbit Catcher” (1962), written five and six years after “Pursuit,” Plath continues to address gender roles within the sexual relationship. While typical gender roles remain, unlike the arrangement in “Pursuit” where the male figure is associated with the animal, in these poems the female subjects are aligned with the non-human animal images. In doing this, the common association between women and animals is made, and Plath addresses the familiar

¹³ The summer before Plath entered Smith College she began corresponding with Eddie Cohen. Through this long-standing correspondence, Plath complained about the “unfairness of the requirement that women but not men remain virgins” (Middlebrook 39).

connections between masculinity and the destruction of non-human animals. Although it is substantially different in construction and theme, I will also closely examine Plath's poem "Pheasant," as Plath clearly establishes the affinity between women and animals and man's wish to destroy the non-human.

The female figures in both "Zoo Keeper's Wife" and "The Rabbit Catcher" are closely associated with non-human animals, while the male figures enact stereotypical masculine roles (zookeeper and hunter), dominating and threatening both animals and the female subjects identified with them. However, although these roles are clearly defined, the speakers in both "Zoo Keeper's Wife" and "The Rabbit Catcher," like the speaker in "Pursuit," complicate these typical gender divisions with their ambivalence towards the violence and destruction directed at them. As in "Pursuit," the predatory violence of the male figure is also rationalized as instinctual, thereby complicating the triangular relationship between male, female and non-human animal, as it functions in the sexual realm.

"Zoo Keeper's Wife" confronts both the horror and hopelessness of the wife of a zookeeper faced with his overwhelming patriarchal dominance. In the relationship between zookeeper, his grotesque animals, and the female subject, the typical gender dichotomies remain intact. Uroff suggests that by incorporating zoo animals, Plath utilizes "his [Hughes's] animals for her own quite separate purposes," facilitating an exploration of female identity under the control of the zookeeper (Uroff 9). By employing his animals for her poetic zoo, Plath allows for a fictionalized version of Hughes himself to emerge — not just a "master" of poetic animals in his own work, but also as the "master" in her fictional zoo.¹⁴

¹⁴ Hughes was not only a poetic master at capturing the animal image on the page but also, earlier in his career, worked at a zoo (Hayman 153).

Acknowledging a disturbed female self, the speaker ruminates on the relationship between herself and her husband, the zookeeper. Through this relationship, she establishes her victim position, identifying with her husband's zoo animals, also considered subordinate. It is through this dynamic that the identities and relationship of the male and female figures emerge. Although the positions of the animals and female are similar, through the dominance of the zookeeper the animals become his agents, so that they too threaten the speaker.

By portraying a relationship within the "tindery cages" of a zoo, Plath conjures up various attributes commonly associated with zoos (Plath *CP* 155). In "Why Zoos Disappoint," John Berger explains that "in the 19th century, public zoos were an endorsement of modern colonial power" and "the capturing of the animals was a symbolic representation of... conquest" (122). The zookeeper in this poem demonstrates his command and "conquest" of not only the zoo animals but the speaker as well. Zoo animals are objects to be looked at and it is through this objectification that the non-human animal is inevitably marginalized. Berger argues that "visitors visit the zoo to look at animals...*you are looking at something that has been rendered absolutely marginal*" (Berger, "Why Zoos Disappoint" 122). The husband's objectification and marginalization of his animals extends to his wife as well. She too is one of his creatures, confined behind the bars of their domestic relationship.

As in "Pursuit," the speaker in "Zoo Keeper's Wife" is a victim, and therefore identifies with other victims. In "Pursuit," the speaker realizes her fate in becoming "bait" alongside "Charred and ravened women" (Plath, *CP* 22); in "Zoo Keeper's Wife," the speaker acknowledges that the "heads and tails of my sisters decompose" in "my belly" (Plath, *CP* 154). In this more intense identification, bypassing a mere association, the other victims, her "sisters" are pieces *within* her guts, where they "decompose... /

melting like coins in the powerful juices" (Plath, *CP* 154). Their grievances are her grievances.

Once victimized, not only is their identity as female removed but also their identity as human, becoming "bait," or reduced to mere "heads and tails." According to Carol Adams, "before someone can be consumed or used, she has to be seen as consumable, as usable, as a *something* instead of a *someone*" (14). Therefore, for the male to succeed in consuming the female, she must identify herself or be identified with the non-human. The identification with other non-human victims in her husband's zoo confirms the threat to her self. In recognizing the eminent threat she states, "I can stay awake all night, if need be / Cold as an eel, without eyelids" (Plath, *CP* 154). Not just the speaker, but all women, all victims, have taken on animalistic qualities, becoming part of his menagerie of zoo animals.

However, not unlike the subject in "Pursuit," the speaker in "Zoo Keeper's Wife" also shows a certain amount of ambivalence towards her victim position as a member of his zoo. Similarly to the way in which Hughes's poetic animals lured Plath into including them in her own poetry, the zookeeper's animals also seduce his wife. The speaker recalls, "You wooed me with the wolf-headed fruit bats," the "armadillo dozed in his sandbin / Obscene and bald as a pig" (Plath, *CP* 155). Even though these animals are "Obscene," the speaker is drawn to them. Affirming her decision to become part of his zoo she states, "I entered your bible, I boarded your ark" (Plath, *CP* 155). She consciously chooses to board his ark, agreeing to the rules of his bible, becoming part of his collection, another caged animal behind bars.

Written a little less than a year after "Zoo Keeper's Wife," "The Courage of Shutting-Up" continues to connect Hughes's collection of animals with the violence of the male/female relationship. Here, the speaker claims "courage" in remaining passively

quiet. Bundtzen claims that, for women, the act of staying quiet or “shutting-up” “is often conceived of as a feminine virtue” (*The Other Ariel* 194). Therefore, like the speaker in “Zoo Keeper’s Wife,” who refuses to stir for fear that the “Guts bag” holding the other victims will “clack like a child’s rattle” (Plath, *CP* 154), the speaker in “The Courage of Shutting-Up,” “in spite of artillery,” maintains a “shut mouth” (Plath, *CP* 209). Because her tongue is not being used, remaining passive, it becomes part of the “collection of *objects* or stuffed trophies belonging to a male hunter” (Bundtzen, *The Other Ariel* 77). Under the traditional constraints of femininity, his patriarchal presence has essentially succeeded in shutting her up. The tongue “has been put by, / Hung up in the library with the engravings of Rangoon / And the fox heads, the otter heads, the heads of dead rabbits” (Plath, *CP* 210). Witnessing her tongue hanging next to the heads of foxes, otters, and rabbits, all animals Hughes utilized in his poetry, not only confirms her silence but also exterminates any voice she may have had.¹⁵ The woman’s voice hangs on the wall with other marginalized creatures, thereby confirming an objectified feminine image as a victim.

In *Wolf Masks: Violence in Contemporary Literature*, Lawrence Rie addresses Hughes’s portrayal of violence in nature, claiming that for Hughes “violence in nature is a positive force, but when man imposes the intellect upon it, he makes it into something destructive” (96). Published in 1957, “The Jaguar” explores these issues through Hughes’s poetic construction of a zoo and the subsequent relationship between human and jaguar. While Hughes’s zoo is initially similar to Plath’s, the focus narrows on to the image of a caged jaguar, and the emphasis on the jaguar’s ability to remain free through his powerful instincts. The poem addresses some of the issues examined in Berger’s “Why Zoos Disappoint.” By including spectators in his poetic representation of the zoo,

¹⁵ See “The Thought-Fox” (1957) and “An Otter” (1960).

Hughes explores the definitions and constraints of freedom and captivity. Because of its masculine characteristics as a predator, the jaguar has a great impact on the human viewers. Therefore, because of Hughes's overwhelmingly masculine description of the jaguar, it succeeds in transcending its current situation as an object in captivity. By allowing the jaguar to impose itself so forcefully on the viewing public, Hughes reverses the typical dichotomy of captive Other and free human.

According to Berger, "the public purpose of zoos is to offer visitors the opportunity of looking at animals" ("Why Zoos Disappoint" 123). The common gaze of zoo-goers in "The Jaguar" functions quite differently. Initially, the animals presented are typical zoo animals, caged, behind the safety of bars; displaced from their natural environment, their identity is removed. The "apes yawn," "tiger and lion // Lie still as the sun," and the "boa-constrictor's coil / Is a fossil" (Hughes 19). Bored within captivity, these animals are confined as objects almost to the point of non-existence: "Cage after cage seems empty" (Hughes 19). However, "At a cage where the crowd stands, stares, mesmerized" is "a jaguar hurrying enraged" (Hughes 19). Unlike their typical placid gaze at the animals yawning and laying in the sun, in the presence of the jaguar the crowd becomes "mesmerized," lured towards him. Because humans traditionally gaze at zoo animals, the animals remain objectified; however, with the presence of the jaguar, this relationship shifts and when the panther traps the gaze of the crowd, he gains a certain amount of control.

The pronouns emphasize the jaguar's masculinity. Uroff argues that "the situation of 'The Jaguar' is the simple contrast between the animal and human" (54); however, when the identity of the jaguar is revealed as male, gender implications are also revealed. Unlike Plath's animals in "Zoo Keeper's Wife," the jaguar is associated with masculinity and therefore never considered a victim, even though he is physically behind

bars. In *Ted Hughes*, Scigaj claims, “the jaguar’s activity is congruent with his power to transform every energetic moment into an inner visionary freedom” (34). Here, “the spectators at the zoo are the imprisoned...for they lack the vitality and inner freedom of the jaguar” (Scigaj, *Ted Hughes* 34). The jaguar is the all-powerful masculine identity, which in turn feminizes the spectators, as they become “imprisoned” by their own gaze. Hughes’s “jaguar scorns the bars of his cage,” clearly illustrating the “expansiveness of the jaguar’s inner freedom,” while the speaker in “Zoo Keeper’s Wife” fails at attaining “inner freedom,” remaining threatened by the zoo animals and unable to escape her confining role (Scigaj, *The Poetry of Ted Hughes: Form and Imagination* 48).

In *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*, Ronald Hayman argues that the speaker in “Zoo Keeper’s Wife” expresses a “violent female revulsion against male desire” (153). Even though she states, “I entered your bible, I boarded your ark,” implying an initial willingness to be included in his zoo, their bed is full of “bloodied chicks and...quartered rabbits,” confirming his propensity to collect and destroy non-human animals (Plath, *CP* 155). In their bed the speaker refers to him as “My fat pork, my marrowy sweetheart,” adding “Some things of this world are indigestible” (Plath, *CP* 155). By referring to the zookeeper as “fat pork” and “marrowy,” Plath not only sexualizes the relationship but also, as Hayman argues, portrays “revulsion” at sexual advances, as they are “indigestible.”

She asks herself, “Should I stir,” but then quickly discards the idea, believing that the “pink and purple plastic / Guts bag would clack like a child’s rattle, / Old grievances jostling each other, so many loose teeth” (Plath, *CP* 154). These are not only her “grievances,” but those of the other victims she carries in her guts. Even though the “clack” of the “loose teeth” inside plagues her, she remains passive, sealing her fate as a creature in his zoo and as a victim. According to Berger, animals in zoos are “isolated

from each other” and “have become utterly dependent upon their keepers” (“Why Zoos Disappoint” 123). Perhaps this is one reason why she remains passive; in accepting her role as a zoo creature, she accepts her victimization and is therefore destined to remain dependent.

Once inside the “cages” of the zoo and their relationship, the threat of sexual consumption as a creature within his zoo becomes a reality as the zookeeper and his animals devour her:

Your two-horned rhinoceros opened a mouth
 Dirty as a bootsole and big as a hospital sink
 For my cube of sugar: its bog breath
 Gloved my arm to the elbow.
 The snails blew kisses like black apples. (Plath, *CP* 155)

The excitement that the speaker experiences in “Pursuit” is absent, as the grotesquerie of the animals frightens and disgusts her. Here, the sexual relationship moves away from the dead, although passive, “bloodied chicks and the quartered rabbits,” as the “two-horned rhinoceros” exposes his doubled sexual potency, threatening her as he opens his mouth. The rhinoceros resembles the traditional symbolic representation of the devil, with his sexual organ (horns) “forked like a serpent’s tongue,” having two phalluses, thereby increasing his sexual potency (Rowland 143). The female, a “cube of sugar,” has no chance against the double-phallus and the “bog breath” of masculinity. Even kisses become rotten, “like black apples,” verifying her sexual disgust. His zoo animals have consumed her entirely, entering her mind and her dreams, thereby completing the cyclic structure of the poem as she returns to her insomnia, stating, “I flog apes owls bears sheep / Over their iron stile. And still don’t sleep” (Plath 155). Even though she continues to “flog” his animals, trying to maintain some sort of identity apart from them, it remains

hopeless. She is part of his collection, a trophy on his wall, a member of his zoo, confirming his conquest of her.

Written about one year after "Zoo Keeper's Wife," "The Rabbit Catcher" continues with a similar sentiment, addressing the identity of the female and its subsequent destruction at the hands of the male figure. "The Rabbit Catcher" also employs the non-human animal image to explore violent undercurrents between genders. Unlike the animal representations in "Pursuit," "Zoo Keeper's Wife," "Burning the Letters," and "Pheasant," where the non-human animals emerge through direct representation, in "The Rabbit Catcher," the rabbit is present only by means of indirect reference. Plath avoids using the rabbit directly; therefore, its identity rests in its association with the female and in the relationship between the two genders. However, this indirect use of the rabbit is crucial to the definition of the "place" and identity of both genders (particularly the speaker) as well as the negotiation of violence and aggression.

Again, elements of the Plath/Hughes relationship impinge on the poem. According to Rose, identifying the "rabbit catcher with Hughes," this is an exploration of Plath's marital "sexual drama" (136). In *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath*, Anne Stevenson connects this poem, specifically the images of the rabbit and rabbit catcher, with a particular experience Plath and Hughes had. Stevenson claims that the images Plath uses in this poem originated from their reactions when coming across a "line of snares along a clifftop" near their home in Devon (244). Plath, feeling a connection and having sympathy with the fate of the rabbits, began ripping the snares from the ground. Hughes, however, felt an affinity with the rabbit catchers and their livelihood and was therefore upset at what Plath had done. While many of the images may originate from these events, "The Rabbit Catcher" goes beyond them, once more addressing gender roles through a triangular model.

“The Rabbit Catcher” proved to be a difficult poem for Hughes to accept, not reading it until years after it was written (Stevenson 244) and omitting it from the first publication of *Ariel* in 1965 (it was finally published in 1971) (Hayman 95). However, many years later, in *Birthday Letters* (1998), Hughes answered back with his own version of “The Rabbit Catcher.” While his version reads much more like the biographical account narrated by Stevenson, he employs much of Plath’s imagery: a “gorse cliff,” a “hollow,” and a “snare,” therefore constructing similar gender representations to those found in Plath’s poem (Hughes 1137). By associating Plath with the victimized rabbits (non-human) and himself with the rabbit catchers (human) Hughes clearly distinguishes typical gender roles. In Hughes’s “The Rabbit Catcher,” the speaker states “I found a snare” and “Without a word / You tore it up and threw it into trees. // I was aghast...” (Hughes 1137). The speaker continues to distinguish the two gendered positions stating, “You saw blunt fingers, blood in the cuticles, / Clamped round a blue mug. I saw / Country poverty raising a penny, / Filling a Sunday stewpot” and “You cried: ‘Murderers!’” (Hughes 1138). Growing up in the country, Hughes identifies with rural tradition and human survival, accepting the destruction of rabbits, necessary in “raising a penny,” while Plath only sees the “blood in the cuticles,” and the kill, the pure destruction of man killing animals. Plath connects the plight of the rabbit in the snares with the plight of the woman in a domestic scenario, as she is “Clamped” and constricted to the home and to a particular socially predetermined role.

By applying the Hughes/Plath biography as well as considering Hughes’s poem in reply, one can only agree with Rose in assuming that the rabbit catcher does represent a fictional Hughes, which in turn allows for the identities of Plath and the rabbit to join. Thus, unlike “Pursuit,” where the predatory male figure is associated with the non-human

animal image, this poem identifies the female subject with the animal. Consequently, the male, acting out violence against the woman and the rabbit, becomes their destroyer.

In aligning the speaker with prey and the male with the hunter, Plath immediately constructs the gender polarities of the “sexual drama.” The identity of the male figure rests firmly in the image of the hunter, maintaining the common association between aggression and masculinity. In “License to Kill: An Ecofeminist Critique of Hunters’ Discourse,” Kheel states that “by all accounts, hunting always has been a predominantly male activity” (88). Unlike the predatory instinct portrayed with the panther in “Pursuit,” in Plath’s “The Rabbit Catcher” the male hunter kills “animals not for meat but for their symbolic value,” upholding the traditional representation of the human hunter as seen throughout history (Bergman 822). While Hughes’s “The Rabbit Catcher” portrays the hunting of rabbits as necessary to “fill the stew pot and raise a penny,” thereby negating a traditional “sport-hunting” attitude, Plath’s portrayal differs greatly. Perhaps because Hughes had grown up around hunting, he could distinguish between “survival hunting” and “sport-hunting.” Plath, on the other hand, fails to make that distinction, portraying all hunting as an act of male violence and destruction. For hunters, killing animals confirms the dominance and power they have over the non-human animal. By employing the images of the rabbit and the rabbit catcher, Plath explores this association as it enters the human sexual relationship. Although the male force remains threatening, it is the ambivalent attitude of the speaker that complicates this relationship.

While the male figure’s identity remains entirely human, the speaker’s joins with the rabbit’s. In some of Plath’s poems — “The Shrike,” “Pursuit,” “Ariel,” and a few of the bee poems — the human figure is *completely* embodied in the non-human animal image, becoming the animal. Here, however, the speaker does not *become* the rabbit. Instead, the rabbit is a symbol for the speaker to associate with, by virtue of their similar

status. In aligning the speaker with the rabbit, Plath constructs a traditional victimized identity, utilizing the symbolism of a prey animal.

Besides the obvious association with prey, in ancient Rome the rabbit or hare was valued, “not only as the animal of Venus, goddess of love, but as a medical remedy for sexual deficiencies” (Rowland 133). Prized for its fertility and alignment with self-sacrifice (Rowland 89), the hare “became the perfect symbol of woman” (Rowland 134). Apart from having multiple links with sexuality, the rabbit is also a symbol of timidity, thereby associating the power with the figure opposite it, which is undoubtedly a predator or male (Rowland 135). Through the dichotomy between victim and aggressor (female and male, animal and human), Plath confronts the relationship between birth and death, relating them back to gender and the sexual realm. While “The Rabbit Catcher” fails to challenge these traditional constructions, it does work to reveal elements of force and violence in gendered environments. Here, force continuously acts against the speaker, creating a typical representation of the female-as-victim. Thus, Plath explores the place and identity of both genders, negotiating the power and aggression experienced by the protagonist. However, like the speaker in “Pursuit,” the speaker in “The Rabbit Catcher” is also ambivalent towards this force, which undoubtedly complicates her role. Even though violence threatens her, as it does in “Pursuit,” she is not completely repulsed, but also attracted to the torture that this violence entails.

In “Pursuit,” the panther is represented directly in terms of his physical body: he “prowls,” has “teeth,” “fur,” “haunches,” and “claws” (Plath, *CP* 22-23). The rabbit in “The Rabbit Catcher” is represented only implicitly, through the imagery surrounding the relationship between the two figures, which takes place in a “hollow,” with “snares,” “thickets,” and “Tight wires” (Plath, *CP* 193-194). These are the only references to the rabbit besides the title; its body is not directly depicted. Perhaps Plath presents the

physicality of the predatory animals as another way to portray them as masculine, having a violent and therefore overwhelming presence (like Hughes's "Jaguar"). In contrast, the rabbit's identity rests solely on the association between itself and the speaker as victims of force. While the physical rabbit-as-animal fails to emerge, it is through this connection and identification that the speaker is able to locate her own position.

For my close analysis of "The Rabbit Catcher" Rose's work will be referred to often, as it stands as the most useful analysis and in-depth in coverage of this particular poem. While her analysis asserts concrete arguments regarding violence, sexuality and domesticity, it does not explore fully the connection between these and the symbolic rabbit image. Therefore, while my study of this poem is closely aligned with Rose's, it will further her analysis by relating it to Plath's characteristic use of the non-human animal.

"The Rabbit Catcher" begins ambiguously, in a "place of force" (Plath, *CP* 193), an all-inclusive environment, thereby existing anywhere and everywhere. Plath's ambiguity leaves this "place" open for interpretation, as a natural landscape as well as a "place" in a relationship. Because the speaker is threatened and holds no power, her status as a victim is emphasized. The type of "force" imposed by this "place" is ambiguous, alluding to nature's force, patriarchal force, and sexual force (Rose 136): "The wind gagging my mouth with my own blown hair, / Tearing off my voice, and the sea / Blinding me with its lights" (Plath, *CP* 193). With the alteration of the "place," the "force" attributed to it also changes. Towards the conclusion of the poem, when the relationship enters into the domestic, the force becomes more clearly aligned with sex. Here, however, in the natural environment, the "force" remains ambiguous. The wind removes the subject's agency; it takes control of her body, as she is "gagging" on her "own blown hair." The force of nature pits her against herself. Her body, influenced by

the strength of the wind, gags her, stripping away her voice, thereby threatening her identity. Forces of nature slide into the sexual realm, maintaining dominance over the speaker as the masculine force strips her voice, firmly establishing her as a victim. The force she endures is both the “forces of nature, but also forcing, as in violation or rape” (Rose 136). Rose suggests, more specifically, that by removing her identity and “gagging” her, the force implied is representative of oral sex (Rose 138).

The “place of force” expands from the wind to the sea, also contributing to the removal of her identity, as it is “Blinding [her] with its lights” (Plath, *CP* 193). Gagged and blinded, she once again aligns herself with other victims. The “lives of dead” exist in the “sea,” “spreading like oil” (Plath, *CP* 193). As both giver and taker of life, the sea can be “positive (germinant) or negative (destructive),” maintaining an ambivalent symbolic position, typically considered feminine (Cirlot 241). In Plath’s memoir, “Ocean 1212-W,” which recalls childhood memories near the ocean, she refers to the sea as a “motherly pulse,” thereby connecting it with the feminine (*JP* 117). Because these “lives of the dead” are situated both in a feminine place and as victims, their gender may also be assumed feminine. By identifying with these other victims, they “in turn can be read as part of what assaults her” (Rose 136). Similar to the portrayal in “Zoo Keeper’s Wife” of the past victims in the speaker’s “guts,” here the speaker is also faced by the generalized assault on her own gender. The unavoidable victim status of her femaleness threatens her identity. Essentially, her nature as a woman is unavoidable and “assaults her.” Just like the nature of the rabbit as a prey animal, hunted and snared, the speaker is also unavoidably snared as a victim within the confines of gender relations. Due to her

identity as a woman, her victim status is sealed, and she is destined to remain in that position.¹⁶

Even though the speaker faces violence and force, which maintain her victim role, she is ambivalent about this. Like the female figure in "Pursuit," the protagonist in "The Rabbit Catcher" does not entirely resist her victim position. While in "Pursuit" the speaker considers the panther "lordly" and feels a certain excitement as her "Blood quickens" with his approach, the speaker in "The Rabbit Catcher" feels similar excitement with the torture she endures. For her, the sexual threats presented are both dangerous and enticing. She records:

I tasted the malignity of the gorse,
Its black spikes,
The extreme unction of its yellow candle-flowers.
They had an efficiency, a great beauty,
And were extravagant, like torture. (Plath, *CP* 193)

In the same way that the "wind gagging" the speaker above suggests a possible sexual influence, for Rose this imagery evokes oral sex; as the woman tastes the "malignity" of the phallic "black spikes"; "its yellow candle-flowers" sooth her and the experience is "extravagant, like torture" (Plath, *CP* 193). While she recognizes that tasting the "black spikes" is dangerous, the "yellow candle-flowers" with their "great beauty" ensnare her, acting as bait.

The allure that she experiences from this torture is not only her predicament, but also the rabbit's (Rose 138). In the third stanza, the identities of rabbit and speaker become increasingly connected with each other. Both experience and are enticed by the same thing:

There was only one place to get to.

¹⁶ In reference to Margaret Atwood's second victim position, which determines victim status based on the "dictates of biology" (37).

Simmering, perfumed,

The paths narrowed into the hollow. (Plath, *CP* 193)

Victimized as prey, both female and rabbit are “lured without option” (Rose 138) into the “hollow” as it is the “only place to get to.” Rose asserts that “what lures on the woman, what draws her unfailingly, are nothing other than the most recognizable insignia or clichés of femininity itself (simmering, perfumed, hollow)” (138). They are both forced and lured into the “hollow,” perhaps as part of their “dictates of biology” (Atwood 37). The construction of gender roles by dominant forces decides their fate. Like the rabbit with no choice during a hunt, the female, under the patriarchy, is also limited in her choices of where to go. Here, femininity becomes synonymous with the rabbit hole. In the same way that the construction of domesticity is the assumed “place” for women, the rabbit hole is both the “place” for the rabbit but also potentially dangerous. Under the traditional gender constructions of prey and domesticity, both subjects exist where they should. However, there is danger and constriction in both places, which threatens their identities. Both rabbit and woman are forced and lured into the “narrowed...hollow.” In the same way that the trap is set by the rabbit catcher, the notion of femininity runs parallel, instilled and engrained by patriarchal forces – becoming a trap and threatening an autonomous identity.

Once both rabbit and female have been drawn inside, the “trap takes on the meaning of a birth canal” (Rose 138). In the “birth canal,” what Rose sees as the violence of femininity aligns with the suffering of a rabbit in a snare, linking birth and death through violence. It is in the “hollow,” the birth canal, that “snares” await and “birth pangs” begin (Plath, *CP* 194). Like the wind as air in its most violent state, the act of giving birth is “woman at her most active” and “that activity [is] its own violence” (Rose 139). It is here, in the traditional role of the woman as a bearer of children and nurturer,

that the pain and violence surface. The body of the female, although a source of life, like the sea, is also a source of violence and death. Alicia Ostriker argues that since the 1960s women have been writing about pain and violence in association with the female body ("Body Language" 249). Perhaps, as Plath continued writing in a male dominated society, she began to recognize the "power structures of our culture," and in recognizing a "pervasive violence against all that is female," began acknowledging the pain and violence inflicted on the female body (Lant 648).¹⁷

By the conclusion of "The Rabbit Catcher," the female body is no longer "simmering, perfumed" but a trap, "set close, like birth pangs," demonstrating the violent role the woman takes on through birth and death. She is giving birth to new life; however, in this new life is an end to her own independence with the prospect of being trapped in domesticity, tending to a new child. Femininity constricts on itself, once again becoming self-threatening. Because violence is part of the female body, it cannot be removed, re-establishing the female as a victim and confirming the danger of female sexuality.

In the next stanza, not only does the violence brought on become fully gendered, but this is also "the first moment in which the poem gives the sexual colours of the drama it describes, taking that drama into a domestic setting, where violence closes in on the paraphernalia of everyday life" (Rose 139). It is here, in domesticity, that the representation of violence is sexualized, making the full connection between the places of the rabbit and speaker. By transferring the violence from the "hollow" into the home, Plath firmly establishes the threat and danger existing in the domestic sphere:

I felt a still busyness, an intent.
I felt hands round a tea mug, dull, blunt,
Ringing the white china.
How they awaited him, those little deaths!

¹⁷ See *Three Women: a Poem for Three Voices* (March, 1962), where Plath explores the pain and violence associated with childbirth.

They waited like sweethearts. They excited him. (Plath, *CP* 194)

Rose argues that the emergence of the domestic, identified with the victimized female, refers to the “injustice of marriage” (139). The female feels his “hands round a tea mug... / Ringing the white china.” Established in the traditional feminine place of the domestic, she feels his (the patriarchy’s) hands suffocating her pre-determined “place” as a woman. Because she is giver of life, her role is typically as a bearer and nurturer of children. Not only is he “Ringing” the “white china,” but he has ringed her as well, through the institution of marriage. In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir addresses the active/passive dichotomy surrounding the institution of marriage, claiming that “the girl seems absolutely passive; she *is* married, *given* in marriage by her parents. Boys *get* married, they *take* a wife” (451). The ring she wears confirms her place as *his* wife, which verifies her subordinate role within the relationship. It is in his “ringing” the white china, as he would a rabbit that once again the death of her independent identity closes in.

The last two lines reassert the sexual ambivalence present in so many of Plath’s poems. Even though there is a known threat (“they awaited him, those little deaths!”), and even though the rabbits’ status and fate are sealed as victims, they *wait*, ambivalent towards their own destiny. These “little deaths” “waited like sweethearts” and “excited him.” Rose poses the question, “how can we not read those ‘little deaths’ as orgasm as well as death, the death of the rabbits in their trap; how can we not read it, therefore, as saying that sexuality is a trap?” (139-140). Considering the symbolism of the rabbit, as a sexually rampant and fertile creature, as well as the common association between “little death” and orgasm, the link to sex is indeed unavoidable. This connection between animal death and orgasm excites the male figure, who asserts his power and control over both the natural world and the domestic.

As explored in “Zoo Keeper’s Wife,” the “colonial power” and “conquest” (Berger “Why Zoos Disappoint” 122) of controlling female and animal, not only confirms domination, but also excites the male figure. As seen in the predatory hunt of the panther in “Pursuit,” the hunter in “The Rabbit Catcher” also connects the kill with sexual fulfillment. The completion of the “little deaths” is dependent on the male, once again solidifying the dominance of the patriarchy over the female-as-prey. Rose goes on to explain that it is not that sex leads to death, but that “death is as desirable, as luring, as sex” (Rose 140). By blending the human and the non-human animal worlds, Plath confronts both the dangers and the ambivalence of sex, and the way in which, like a rabbit lured into a trap, sexual relations can lead towards a “ringing,” and a death of the self within the confines of domesticity.

By the final stanza, Plath redirects her attention towards a more personal human relationship, emphasizing the biographical element of the poem:

And we, too, had a relationship –
 Tight wires between us,
 Pegs too deep to uproot, and a mind like a ring
 Sliding shut on some quick thing,
 The constriction killing me also. (Plath, *CP* 194)

This is the final act of violence – the kill. The “wires,” which connect the two of them and the “Pegs too deep to uproot” make it impossible to detach from one another. Wires hold things together, keep things in place; thus, these “wires” have been the only things maintaining this relationship. Perhaps the pegs also refer to the domestic role the speaker has come to take on within the relationship, and she acknowledges that this role is “too deep to uproot,” too engrained to change. Therefore, like the rabbit, her fate at the hands of the patriarchy is sealed as she feels the constriction of the domestic “hollow” close in. When acknowledging the death of the rabbit, the female speaker includes herself in this

death by stating that “The constriction [is] killing me *also*” (emphasis added, Plath, *CP* 194). Therefore, as Ries claims, this death is “not just the death of the rabbit but it is a destruction of the self in her relationship with her lover” (41). By including the word “also,” Plath not only confirms the connection between the rabbit and the speaker, but also confirms the destruction of both at the hands of masculine dominance.

In the third and final poem which I discuss in this section, Plath’s portrayal of the non-human animal image alters. In some ways, “Pheasant,” written in April 1962, more closely resembles Hughes’s animal poems. However, although the focus is more concentrated on the pheasant-as-animal, Plath continues to filter this through the triangular relationship between male, female and animal. In doing this, Plath maintains the traditional gender representations portrayed in both “Zoo Keeper’s Wife” and “The Rabbit Catcher.” Although the observation of the non-human animal is a much more central aspect of “Pheasant,” the beginnings of an altered feminine identity prevent this poem from being considered merely observational.

Once more the roles are clearly defined, with the male represented as a potential destroyer of animals while the speaker identifies with the threatened, non-human animal. However, while the male remains the ultimate aggressor, the speaker’s representation and role begin to alter, as she becomes more assertive in return. Like the female figure in Hughes’s version of “The Rabbit Catcher,” the speaker in “Pheasant” actively protests the destruction of the non-human animal. While the speakers in “Zoo Keeper’s Wife” and “The Rabbit Catcher” express some (internal) protest towards the aggression of the male figure, ambivalence persists and secures their compliance. The passivity of the female begins to subside, as the speaker in “Pheasant” actively demands, “Do not kill it” (Plath, *CP* 191).

However, since the fate of the pheasant remains unknown, the actual power of this demand is also indeterminate, maintaining the possibility that both speaker and pheasant will remain victims. By removing the ambivalence from the relationship between male and female through the animal image, a new feminine identity begins to emerge, strengthening in "Burning the Letters," and attaining a full re-birth in "Ariel." In adjusting the roles and relationships between the three omnipresent figures, male, female, and animal, Plath explores the animal image as *animal* in much more detail. Previously, most of the animals represented have been so intertwined with the identity of the female or male figures that their own identities as complete and "real" animals fail to emerge. Although there is a degree of connection between the identities of the pheasant and the speaker, this has diminished greatly, bringing the representation of the non-human animal closer to what we find in Hughes.

In Hughes's poem, "An Otter," published in 1960, the relationship between man and woman transfers to the relationship between human and non-human animal. Similar to the observational structure of Plath's "Pheasant," "An Otter" explores an otter's "nature" within the environment. However, Hughes employs this real animal to "bring...the 'legend of himself'" into the poem (Uroff 99). Uroff examines the dual identity of the otter, identifying it as a "double-featured creature," going on to argue that the otter is "hunted and hunter, lost yet safe, breathing air 'tainted and necessary,' nourished and drowned by water, . . . more than mere animal" (100). For Uroff, this representation of the otter is actually Hughes's "analogy for man, who seeks his true self" (100).

In the first section of "An Otter," the otter is "neither fish nor beast," but displaced, "Four-legged yet water-gifted" (Hughes 79). The otter is both nothing and everything, able to prosper on land and water. In the second section, man hunts the otter

and it is in this identification with the predatory man that Hughes presents the cause of the otter's displacement. Since the hunting habits of human civilization have intensified, the otter has become a "changed body" (Hughes 79). Like Plath's pheasant, the otter is subject to the control and progress of man, and like the pheasant and speaker, if "Yanked above hounds, reverts to nothing at all": if captured by man, the otter will cease to exist as an otter, but only as a "pelt over the back of a chair" (Hughes 80).

In *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study*, Tim Kendall argues that throughout Plath's poetry there is an emphasis on the "death and rebirth ritual;" however this is also commonly attended by danger and fatality (84). It is through these paradoxes that "Pheasant" functions. The pheasant represents "vibrant life," not only in the physical characteristics portrayed, but also through its connection with the speaker, as a renewed sense of feminine identity becomes a possibility (Kendall 84). However, there is also the threat of death as the pheasant's life is threatened, and, if the male figure destroys the bird, the possibility for a new feminine identity to emerge will be undone by this destruction.

After spotting a pheasant "Through the uncut grass on the elm's hill," the speaker pleads, "Do not kill it" (Plath, *CP* 191). Although the identities of speaker and pheasant are not directly linked, through her keen observation she relates to its position as a possible victim. In *Survival*, Atwood argues that in order to relate to animal victims one must feel threatened (79). Even though the speaker demands "Do not kill it," the decision to destroy the pheasant lies in the hands of the male. Therefore, the speaker is able to identify with the pheasant's position because they are both subordinate. The pheasant is "such a good shape, so vivid," a beautiful "cornucopia" of "green and red," "a fine thing!" (Plath, *CP* 191). Because of its "rareness," it exudes "kingliness" (Plath, *CP* 191). Unlike the zoo animals confined to cages in "Zoo Keeper's Wife," this pheasant is

wild, and “simply in its element” (Plath, *CP* 191). Perhaps the speaker’s demand for its life is fueled by her own identity being constrained within the domestic sphere, as she attempts to spare it, pleading, “Let be, let be” (Plath, *CP* 191). Because the gender roles have not altered from those presented in “Pursuit,” “Zoo Keeper’s Wife,” or “The Rabbit Catcher,” the speaker remains in a subordinate position and therefore does not have the power to ensure the pheasant’s survival.

Animals as Female Agents

In all of the poems discussed so far, all of which pre-date the final, climactic phase of her career, the animal images are either surrogates for the male figure, used to rationalize a predatory, violent nature, or, when associated with the female, represent women’s victim status within the patriarchy. “Burning the Letters,” written in August 1962, begins the transition away from these particular associations between gender and animals. Here, the female speaker employs the non-human animal image as an agent, contributing to the destruction of the male prerogative, thereby initiating a challenge towards typical gender representations.

For Plath, the month of August was a difficult one; her marriage with Hughes was decidedly over, and she faced the harsh reality of Hughes’s infidelity with Assia Wevill (Bundtzen, “Poetic Arson” 436-438). “Burning the Letters” is Plath’s poetic account of an autobiographical incident. In an attempt to seek revenge and perhaps regain some of the control she may have felt she had lost, Plath entered Hughes’s study, gathered everything in and around his desk, and lit a fire fueled with his letters and manuscripts (Bundtzen, “Poetic Arson” 438-439). In recording this incident in poetic form, Plath uses non-human animal images to address violent female revenge.

Initially the speaker is still in her familiar, passive position. Nevertheless, although the speaker is a victim in this sense, she acknowledges her status and refuses to accept that the role is inevitable, thereby placing her in Atwood's third victim position (37). Atwood argues that when a person is in position three, they direct their anger at the real source of oppression as "constructive action" (Atwood 38). By employing a non-human animal image as an agent, the speaker in "Burning the Letters" directs her anger towards the male force that is causing her oppression, and relinquishes her role as a victim. Although the speaker initially occupies the third victim position, her anger and the violence that ensues from it allows her to move quickly from that position to the conclusion as a non-victim. While aligning the speaker with the animal image reaffirms the traditional association between women and the non-human, by including a proactive violence Plath disrupts this traditional gendered association.

Because "Burning the Letters" bridges the gap between victim positions it acts as a transition in Plath's work. As a transitional poem, it initiates the move away from the previous victim representation and towards a powerful non-victim female presented in some of the poems included in *Ariel*. In this final version of the triangular relationship between woman (Plath), non-human animals, and man (Hughes), the speaker breaks free from former passive roles, emerging as an aggressive non-victim. Previously, Plath utilized the non-human animal to identify the inferiority of the place and position of the female. However, in "Burning the Letters," the previously portrayed gender constructions are reversed as the speaker becomes a victor and the male is consigned to the subordinate position. The predator/prey dichotomy is inverted as the speaker seeks out violent revenge, as a predator. Therefore, the female figure must take on predatory or "masculine" characteristics in order to gain independence and rise above her victim position.

In *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation*, Jon Rosenblatt argues that the metaphors in "Burning the Letters" "must be read exclusively in terms of what happened to the poet," and as such finds them "lacking any larger relevance or reference" (107).

However, Rosenblatt fails to recognize that even though this may be a highly autobiographical poem, it is essential for new gendered roles to be distinguished.

Moreover, while it may not depart too far from the actual incident, it provides a useful poetic dialogue between Plath and Hughes. In "Poetic Arson and Sylvia Plath's 'Burning the Letters,'" Bundtzen applies this response towards the poem, arguing that although it "appears paltry," it is an important and essential "slash and burn" poem, "clearing the poetic playing field to make room for the type of poems she would compose for *Ariel*" (328). Its importance lies in the beginnings of a new female identity emerging, leading the way for the fiery heroines that follow.

Even though this poem is substantially influenced by biographical events, by employing non-human animal images to guide the speaker, weaving violence throughout, and enabling the destruction of the masculine force, presumably a fictionalized Hughes, Plath bridges the public and private spheres. Rose claims, "Plath walks the edge, not only between the body and language but also...the edge – occupied by body and language together – between public and private space" (39-40). It is in this dialogue, between body and language, public and private, that the animal symbols within this poem function. Reality and fantasy remain tightly interwoven, functioning both within and beyond the poetic sphere. Through the non-human animals, the boundaries between public and private, internal and external, begin to dissolve.

Throughout Plath's life, she struggled with her identity as a woman poet. Writing in a world surrounded by men, Plath's dual identity, domestic and literary, was complicated by her poetic relationship with Hughes. On one hand, Plath desperately

wanted her writing to be accepted by the successful male poets affiliated with Hughes (Middlebrook 21); on the other hand, she greatly wanted to be a wife and mother. During her life, Hughes proved to be more successful and recognized as a poet, but for Hughes poetic creativity went without a gendered social stigma attached, and he was able to *fully* explore and utilize his creativity. Plath, on the other hand, did not experience the same degree of poetic success, while the complexity of keeping up her functions as both a female poet and wife and mother plagued her.

Perhaps some of this competitive scenario seeped through in Hughes's poem, "A Modest Proposal" (1957). Here, Hughes presents two wolves, which, through their violent competition with each other, threaten their own existence. In *The Poetry of Ted Hughes*, Scigaj claims, "Hughes portrays the irascibility and the anxiety beneath competition through an extended metaphor of two wolves skirmishing for dominance over each other and for possession of the entire forest" (51). The speaker states, "There is no better way to know us / Than as two wolves" (Hughes 27). They come "separately to a wood" but soon join, becoming "Distracted by the soft competing pulse / Of the other" (Hughes 27). Although they begin with love, it soon becomes entangled with "divisive competition" (Scigaj, *The Poetry of Ted Hughes* 51). Because neither can relinquish the aggression and competitiveness they feel towards the other, "Neither can make die / The painful burning of the coal in its heart / Till the other's body and the whole wood is its own" (Hughes 27). Once control and ownership is attained, the "painful burning" of their hearts will cease.

In "Burning the Letters," Plath destroys the male force both figuratively and literally. By physically writing "Burning the Letters" on the reverse side of Hughes's manuscript of "The Thought-Fox," Plath essentially stamps his rendition of the fox symbol out, creating her own (Bundtzen, "Poetic Arson" 442). In doing this, Plath not

only destroys the male force by means of the symbolism of the poem, but also through the act of writing. In *The Other Ariel*, Bundtzen argues, "Plath's handwriting mars his 'neat prints into the snow,' and thereby defies her husband's poetic authority" (54). In writing over Hughes's poetic animal, Plath claims her own animal affinity and a poetic authority. Rose argues that, for Plath, "writing is violence, not because it talks about violence – offers it is the subject matter of the text – but because writing brings with it the violence internal to the physical substratum of speech" (37). As Rose suggests, although Plath initially "links violence to the female vulnerability that prevents her from writing," in some of her later poetry, including "Burning the Letters," Plath "makes of violence the very image for the form of writing that she most strongly desires" (118).

In the short story, "The Fifty-Ninth Bear," written in 1959, Plath also employs the animal image as the female figure's agent to destroy the male figure. Initially the woman protagonist behaves passively, but the non-human animal helps her escape the victim mode. Once more, "The Fifty-Ninth Bear" has an autobiographical dimension, deriving from an American road trip that took Plath and Hughes (here Norton and Sadie) through Yellowstone National Park. Plath constructs the common representation of a marital relationship as the story progresses through their camping trip. However, woven through Sadie's seemingly compliant and passive existence is an undercurrent of violence. While on their trip, the couple keeps a tally on the number of bears they will see, betting on the outcome; Sadie asserts that they will see fifty-nine, and it is this bear that proves to be Norton's demise.

When the fifty-ninth bear arrives, she wills it to destroy her husband, acting against her previous compliance. Van Dyne claims that the "dynamic between the couple is a seductive but duplicitous power play in which the wife's apparently pliant will is treacherous" as her "more powerful but unspoken wish...wills the bear to win" (23).

Initially the wife of the story, much like the speaker at the beginning of "Burning the Letters," is presented as being in "vulnerable shape," feeling as though she exists "nowhere" (Plath, *JP* 94). Norton, the husband, does not believe Sadie could "survive out from under the wings of his guardianship;" he believes himself to be her "protecting god," as he "enclose[s] her" (Plath, *JP* 98-99). As the story draws to an end, Sadie becomes increasingly dissatisfied with her position within the confines of the marriage. In the final scene, Norton attempts to scare a bear away that threatens their campsite, however this is unsuccessful because, "there [is] another will working, a will stronger, even, than his" (Plath, *JP* 104). The bear becomes Sadie's agent, threatening and ultimately destroying Norton. By the conclusion, her revenge is complete as Norton, being attacked, "hear[s] a shrill cry – of terror, or triumph, he c[an] not tell" (Plath, *JP* 105). The bear that destroys him is "the last bear, her bear, the fifty-ninth" (Plath, *JP* 105). Sadie has taken ownership of the bear, using it (as does Plath herself in writing this story) to act out her aggression towards her husband.

In "Burning the Letters" the initial position of the female is also as a victim, "tired / Of the white fists of old / Letters" (Plath, *CP* 204). These "Letters" have plagued her and now that they have surfaced she is tired of upholding the passive victim role, seeking revenge as she lights "a fire" with them (Plath, *CP* 204). Like the anger a "dog pack," holds in "under a pack of men," the speaker has been "Holding in [her] hate" under the confines of the patriarchy (Plath, *CP* 204). Not only is the speaker under her husband, but subordinate to a "*pack* of men" (emphasis added), the patriarchal force, where she has remained silent and subdued.

In reversing the traditional construction of gender — the masculine panther "Coming up and up the stairs" (Plath *CP* 22), or the rabbit catcher, "Ringing the white china" (Plath, *CP* 194) — the speaker in "Burning the Letters" takes an active,

penetrating role by entering his “place,” the attic. Unlike the previous domestic representation of the female “place,” the male’s place is a study, an academic and creative place. By removing the contents from the attic, she effectively removes him from his place. She claims the contents of his study for her own use, as the fuel for her fire. By making the attic “good,” she will cease to be reduced to a “Dumb fish,” the male no longer has the ability to lure her, as he had previously (Plath, *CP* 204).

Although the fire seems harmless at first, as it “may lick and fawn,” it is “merciless” (Plath, *CP* 204). Perhaps this is representative of the female, who, on the surface, within the confines of domesticity and wearing a “housedress,” seems harmless, whereas underneath she too is able to become merciless. The speaker remains tired and docile until she is reminded of the threat, stating, “a name with black edges // Wilts at my foot, / Sinuous orchis” (Plath, *CP* 205). The hissing that the sibilants of “Sinuous orchis” produce on the tongue symbolizes not only the hissing of the fire, but as stated, “a name with black edges,” resembling the hiss of Assia’s name. This hiss, like a snake’s, is the hiss of evil, a force of destruction (Cirlot 286). Assia’s potent sexuality helps to destroy the union of Plath and Hughes. The hiss of Assia’s name is a destructive force and fuels Plath’s destruction of the male figure in a final act of revenge.

Once the “name with black edges” hisses at her feet, the speaker is unable to repress her feelings, stating that even though “Warm rain greases my hair,” it “extinguishes nothing” (Plath, *CP* 205). Even though rain, signifying purification (Cirlot 272), washes over her, her rage is unmodified and her “veins glow like trees” (Plath, *CP* 205). In an act of revenge, the “dog pack” becomes her agent and begins “tearing a fox” (Plath, *CP* 204-205). While Plath lends a certain ambiguity to this incident, this is a literary destruction. Plath is celebrating her own poetic immortality in the destruction of Hughes’s seemingly immortal literary fox representation. The speaker is no longer a

“Dumb fish,” and unlike the previous representation of the dull dogs, she now claims the dogs as her own, asserting her destruction of the male through their violence. The speaker states, “This is what it is like - / A red burst and a cry / That splits from its ripped bag and does not stop” (Plath, *CP* 205). The heart is ripped from the fox’s chest in a “red burst and a cry.” Referring back to the speaker in “Zoo Keeper’s Wife,” remaining passive out of fear that by moving she will rip her guts bag, here, the speaker finally achieves release, as the fox’s cry “from its ripped bag... / does not stop.”

It is important to be aware of the intimate connection between Plath’s destruction of the fox image and Hughes’s own representation. When Hughes published “The Thought-Fox” in 1957, he created his first, and arguably most influential poetic animal. Throughout his career, Hughes consistently referred back to the fox as a figure of his own poetic voice, essentially a representation of his identity and immortality as a poet. In *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath’s Ariel Poems*, Van Dyne addresses the importance of the fox image to Hughes, quoting a BBC broadcast from 1961. Hughes states,

Long after I am gone, as long as a copy of the poem [“The Thought-Fox”] exists, every time anyone reads it the fox will get up somewhere out in the darkness and come walking towards them...It will live for ever, it will never suffer from hunger or hounds. I have it with me wherever I go. And I made it. And all through imagining it clearly enough and finding the living words. (qtd. in Van Dyne 40)

For Hughes, his fox, as Robinson argues in *Ted Hughes as Shepherd of Being*, “is not just an analogy for the poetic process: it remains a real fox” (23). This, for Hughes, was what made the poem successful and gave it the immortality he felt it had attained. Hughes’s fox was his poetic animal, a symbol of romantic and creative energy captured on the page. The reality of the fox portrayed through the poem verified Hughes’s strength as an animal poet.

Years later, Hughes returns to his poetic fox in "Epiphany" (1998), published in *Birthday Letters*. Here, the speaker reflects on an incident in London, where, faced with the opportunity to buy a fox cub, he realizes that bringing the cub home would test his marriage. In "Epiphany," the speaker realizes that his wife will not and cannot accept a fox. Perhaps the fox is the part of his identity that is untamed and primitive; for Hughes, this would be his rural sensibility, which as explained in the discussion of "The Rabbit Catcher," proved difficult for Plath to fully accept. Although the poem is written years later, the fox image in "Epiphany" maintains a similar relationship with the speaker's identity as "The Thought-Fox" did. Therefore, when he states, "I let that fox-cub go," he relinquishes a part of his own identity, and in doing so he realizes "Our marriage had failed" (Hughes 1117).

Plath's attack on Hughes's seemingly immortal fox signifies the feminine rise towards non-victim status through the destruction of the male figure. In much the same way that Hughes employs the fox in "The Thought-Fox" as his creative agent, here Plath employs her own animal symbol in an act of violent revenge, destroying his original portrayal of this poetic animal. Plath's dogs destroy Hughes's symbol (Plath, *CP* 205). Plath not only dismembers Hughes's fox image within the text of "Burning the Letters," but also in the act of writing it. Van Dyne claims that Plath's "counterclaim defies Hughes's visionary equation of his own poetic genius with the mysterious powers of nature; it also defines the engendering source for the next cycle of Ariel poems" (sic, 41). In the literal act of writing over his previously constructed fox, Plath mars the original version with her own violent poetics. By adding her own rendition and image of a fox, Plath creates her own, victimized animal image associated with the male. In the final lines of the poem, Plath renounces Hughes's claim that his fox is immortal, claiming that it is the "red burst" and "cry" that

...goes on
 Dyeing the air,
 Telling the particles of the clouds, the leaves, the water
 What immortality is. That it is immortal. (Plath, *CP* 205)

Through the violence located within the poem as well as in the act of writing over Hughes's "The Thought-Fox," Plath consigns the immortal poetic animal to a different role – now it is a victim.

Within "Burning the Letters," it is clear that Plath's previous representation of the domestic, victimized female figure begins to disintegrate and a more independent and fierce woman emerges. In the majority of the work that follows, the triangular model that is present in "Pursuit," "Zoo Keeper's Wife," "The Rabbit Catcher," and "Burning the Letters" recedes into the background as Plath's work focuses more specifically on the identity of the woman figure. Plath moves on from utilizing the animal as a navigator within the male-female relationship and begins to use it in sole regards to the identity of the female figure. Although the male figure is not completely eliminated, his role is greatly diminished as the focus shifts towards the complexities of the woman's role and representation.

Chapter II

Revising Identity: Rebirth and Transcendence

In 1976, Judith Kroll wrote *Chapters in Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, which challenged the majority of Plath criticism to that point. Rather than read Plath's work through a feminist framework, as so many earlier critics had done, Kroll argued that Plath's work is the "articulation of a mythic system" (2). Because her argument departs from those feminist readings which inevitably reflect unfavorably on Hughes, he firmly supported Kroll and "did everything he could to assist her imposition of a mythic structure and narrative on Plath's work" (Bundtzen, *The Other Ariel* 29). While I do use Kroll extensively in this chapter, particularly in discussing Plath's final poems, much of her criticism is speculative: as Bundtzen points out, we must ask ourselves, "how does Kroll know this?" (*The Other Ariel*, 29).

Throughout her discussion of Plath's mythology, Kroll distinguishes between what she calls a "true" and "false" self (10). She argues that the "false self of the heroine is ineffectual, dominated, and powerless," while the "true self" is the "positive, whole, reborn self" (10). According to Kroll, in order for Plath's "true self" to materialize within her poetry, there is a "process of awakening" and an "overthrowing...of suppression" (11). Kroll argues that "male-defined" roles, like those of wife, daughter and mother, "cripple" women and make them subservient, and accordingly "may be considered forms of the false self" (10). Therefore, "when the true self fully emerges the heroine is not defined in relation to a man" (Kroll 10). While the speaker's identity continues to be defined by the male figure opposite her, — as it is for the female victims in "The Rabbit Catcher," "Pursuit," and "Zoo Keeper's Wife" — her "true self" fails to emerge. As long

as there is a direct relationship with the male figure, the “false self” remains and female subordination and victimization persist.

Although, as discussed in the previous chapter, the speaker in “Burning the Letters” begins to reverse her victim position, her identity remains associated with the male figure. Her violence is a reaction and outburst of revenge directed at *him*. Because they remain so closely associated, her identity is reliant on the male. Even though she expresses aggression and violence, characteristics typically associated with masculinity, her total transcendence is impossible. As long as the identities of female (Plath) and male (Hughes) are linked, his presence will continue to influence her place and identity.

In this chapter, I identify poems where the man, and therefore the triangular relationship, fades away. Without the triangular relationship, the speaker’s identity and place are no longer reliant on or constructed by the presence of the male figure opposite her. The predator/prey dichotomy begins to fade without his presence, which allows the female figure to explore her own position and identity through the non-human animal image. However, this does not necessarily guarantee successful transcendence for her. Instead, two different groups of poems emerge: in the first, the relationship between the speaker and the non-human leaves the female feeling alienated from the world; but in second, the relationship with the non-human allows the female to emerge as a powerful non-victim. While Kroll’s argument about the role of myth in Plath’s work aids my discussion, it fails to explore fully the role of the animal images. Therefore, while I draw on Kroll’s model of the “true” and “false self,” I further this construction by applying it to the mythic non-human animal.

While the force of Kroll’s argument is easily recognized in “Stings” and in “Ariel,” earlier poems, where the direct relationship with a male is absent but the female’s “true self” still fails to emerge, complicate this argument. In “All the Dead

Dears," "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor," "Wuthering Heights," and "Blue Moles," the absence of the male does not guarantee a transcendence of the feminine self. Instead, while the speaker continues to identify with the non-human, she remains alienated, preventing the chance of a revised identity.

Plath completed all four poems prior to the break up of her marriage; however, "Wuthering Heights" was written considerably later than the others, in 1961, and as such signifies a "regression" in terms of the female character's development towards independence. "All the Dead Dears," "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor," and "Blue Moles" were completed between 1957 and 1958, at a time in Plath's career when she was writing in the shadow of Hughes and treating her animal images in a largely realistic manner. In these poems, as Rose argues, "nature is hostile to her but grips her in its alien power until gradually, tentatively, she discovers the beginnings of an identity – unmistakably female – which will reach its apotheosis in Plath's final work" (130). Although nature begins as hostile and alienating, it allows for the gradual "beginnings of an identity – unmistakably female," which only takes place for Plath when the true non-human element is removed and replaced by a mythic animal image. As long as Plath's poetic non-human images are realistic, as they are in all four of these poems, they fail to bring the speaker closer to a revised self. It is not until the bee poems where the animal begins to turn mythological, that the heroine initiates her transcendence from her victim self into a powerful and even predatory female figure.

Once Plath establishes mythic animal representations they succeed as poetic prostheses for her heroines. Like many other women during the 1950s, Plath faced the reality of her role as a female. In creating her own myths, she reverses typical gendered characteristics, thereby reconstructing the role and identity of the female figure. In Judith Gardiner's article, "On Female Identity and Writing by Women," she points out that

since 1920 female authors have altered their focus to search for and define an independent feminine identity (347). Because, as Gardiner argues, “women never form a self,” being instead continually constructed by male influence, when this influence fails them they are left with an unknown or “false self” (347). Without the male presence, Plath’s heroines begin utilizing animals as vehicles, which in turn allows the feminine identity to graduate from a “false” to a “true” self. The animal images that serve this purpose for Plath are the mythological ones, not those she meets in naturalistic encounters with the everyday world.

Part I:

The Alienated Female

In “All the Dead Dears,” “Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor,” “Wuthering Heights,” and “Blue Moles” the typical portrayal of a close female-Nature connection fails as Nature continually shuts the speaker out. Although she is free from male influence, her association with the non-human leaves her feeling inferior and alienated, failing to provide any progress towards a birth of the “true self.” The hostility of Nature portrayed in these four poems disrupts the traditional assumption of a close affinity between women and Nature, and in turn produces an isolated female.

In “All the Dead Dears,” written in 1957 after visiting an exhibit at the Archaeological Museum in Cambridge, Plath confronts the reality of the “gross eating game” (Plath, *CP* 70). The exhibit consists of an open stone coffin with the skeletal remains of an “antique museum-cased lady,” “Rigged poker-stiff on her back” with the “gimcrack / Relics of a mouse and a shrew / That battened for a day on her ankle-bone” (Plath, *CP* 70). Her identity is reduced to an object behind a museum case, proving that in death, she is an ultimate victim, a consumable item for a mouse and shrew. Ries

suggests that Plath's poetic lesson in "All the Dead Dears" may be that "everything in nature, including man, lives off others in violence, and he who asserts himself the most vigorously shall endure the longest" (41). While this may be true at a general level, Plath is particularly concerned with the implications for the speaker as a woman. Because the female figure is habitually represented as a victim, this limits her chances of "endur[ing] the longest" and makes her "natural" place a particularly vulnerable one.

The "gross eating game" that the speaker refers to in the second stanza remains constant as she begins to acknowledge the inevitable process of birth and death. Although initially the speaker finds little connection with the "museum-cased lady," this alters as she states, "This lady here's no kin / Of mine, yet kin she is: she'll suck / Blood and whistle my marrow clean / To prove it" (Plath, *CP* 70). Because death is inevitable for all living things, death connects these two women, perpetuating the cycle of the victimized. For Plath, death too is an implacable force pressing in on the speaker as the "hag hands" threaten to "haul [her] in" (Plath, *CP* 70).

The protagonist transfers the threat of the "museum-cased lady" to her deceased family; "Mother, grandmother, greatgrandmother," and "daft father," all "long gone darlings," threaten not only her life, but also her identity (Plath, *CP* 70-71). Rosenblatt argues that by moving away from the violence of animals (mouse and shrew) and to the possible violence of family members, Plath "exposes the brutality of death more intensely and personally" (*SP: The Poetry of Initiation* 66). According to de Beauvoir, "'to identify oneself' with the mother or with the father is to *alienate oneself* in a model, it is to prefer a foreign image to the spontaneous manifestation of one's own existence, it is to play at being" (de Beauvoir 53). Although identifying with others typically implies inclusion, de Beauvoir points out that by constructing an identity through others you alienate your *independent* self. If the speaker joins her dead family, she essentially gives up her own

identity as a separate person. Therefore, in order for the female figure in "All the Dead Dears" to emerge as an independent identity, she must free herself from *all* external influences that threaten her, not just that of the male figure.

Plath wrote "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor" in 1958 when she and Hughes were living in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Once more, the association between the speaker and Nature results in her isolation. Here, Plath uses the sea to explore the vulnerability of the speaker's identity. The sea was an image Plath turned to continually throughout her career in order to explore the merging of birth and death. In much of her writing (including "The Rabbit Catcher," discussed above), the sea is an enveloping force, portrayed as both a giver and taker of life.¹⁸ In "Ocean 1212-W," a memoir written in 1962, Plath describes the life of the ocean as she floats on the water: "breath, that is the first thing. Something is breathing. My own breath? The breath of my mother? No, something else, something larger, farther, more serious, more weary" (*JP* 117). Here, the sea is a living, breathing force. However, the sea is also a dangerous force, commonly leaving the speaker feeling isolated from its power.¹⁹ Again, in "Ocean 1212-W," Plath reflects on her relationship with the sea; however this time, experiencing the outgoing tide, she is a "reject, with the dried black seaweed whose hard beads [she] liked to pop, hollowed orange and grapefruit halves and a garbage of shells" (Plath, *JP* 120). Although the variation of the tides ensures the birth and death cycle, the ebb tide leaves the speaker feeling rejected and alienated.

In "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor," while the vulnerable representation of the female figure found in "All the Dead Dears" remains, her connection with the animal world intensifies, only to leave her feeling more isolated from nature. Initially, the

¹⁸ See "Medusa" (1962): "In any case, you are always there, / Tremulous breath at the end of my line, / Curve of water upleaping / To my water rod, dazzling and grateful, / Touching and sucking." (Plath, *CP* 225).

¹⁹ See "The Bull of Bendylaw" (1959): "The sea, till that day orderly, / Hove up against Bendylaw" (Plath, *CP* 108).

speaker goes to the beach to collect “Free fish-bait: the blue mussels / Clumped like bulbs at the grass-root / Margin of the tidal pools” (Plath, *CP* 95). However, the “sly world[]” of the tide pools leaves her feeling alienated because the mussels’ “hinges had swung / Shut against [her]” (Plath, *CP* 95). Initially, the speaker is in an active and therefore dominant position, harvesting mussels for bait, but when the “sly world” shuts against her, these positions are reversed.

Crabs, “Eyeing” her from the “otherworld,” confirm her exclusion (Plath, *CP* 96). As “they sidle[] / Out in a converging stream / Toward the pool-mouth,” she thinks that their movement may be “to avoid [her]” (Plath, *CP* 96). Because she is unable to identify with their world, she continues to feel alienated from them. In poems like “Pursuit” or “The Rabbit Catcher,” even though the association between woman and animal typically confirms a female victim, the female is not alienated. Instead, she remains connected with the animal image and her identity is in some way confirmed by it. However, without this triangular model, including a male figure, the speaker is faced with an overwhelming feeling of isolation.

In comparing “Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor” with Hughes’s poem, “Relic” (1960), Uroff addresses the distinct gendered difference in these two poems, specifically in the construction and role of the protagonists. While they both concentrate on the power of the sea in providing both life and death, their portrayals of it differ greatly. Uroff argues that Hughes’s speaker in “Relic” is a “fearless observer,” while Plath’s speaker remains a “frightened alien” (11). The speaker in “Relic” never feels isolated from the sea life, but rather observes the raw power of the sea as it “eats its tail, thrives, casts these / Indigestibles, the spars of purposes / That failed far from the surface” (Hughes 78). Although Plath’s mussel hunter does observe the power of the sea as it works to dissolve everything, she is alienated, continually questioning the reason for the retraction of the

sea, as she feels “shut out” from it (Plath, *CP* 96). As a male, in the dominant role, Hughes’s speaker easily positions himself as an autonomous observer. However, Plath’s subject, less assured in a concrete independent identity, continues to observe these images in relation to her own position.

Although written three years after “Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor,” “Wuthering Heights” (1961) continues to address the female’s alienation within Nature. In the first stanza, noticing the horizons, the speaker states, “The horizons ring me like faggots, / Tilted and disparate, and always unstable. / Touched by a match, they might warm me, / And their fine lines singe / The air to orange” (Plath, *CP* 167). Initially, the landscape “ring[s]” and to this extent centers her. But even this dubious stability deserts her as she takes a “step forward,” and the “horizons” “dissolve and dissolve / Like a series of promises,” leaving her estranged (Plath, *CP* 167). Like the retreat of the sea in “Ocean 1212-W,” the dissolving of this orientation in landscape again leaves the female subject feeling abandoned.

As the “wind / Pours by like destiny, bending / Everything in one direction,” she is once again vulnerable in Nature. The horizons fail at keeping her warm and the wind begins to “funnel [her] heat away” (Plath, *CP* 167). Like the danger presented by the dead family members in “All the Dead Dears,” threatening to “haul” the speaker down with them, here the landscape offers a similar threat as the speaker states, “If I pay the roots of the heather / Too close attention, they will invite me / To whiten my bones among them” (Plath, *CP* 167). Unlike the sheep, that “know where they are,” the speaker is unsure of her place in the natural environment and therefore has difficulty in defining herself within it (Plath, *CP* 167). Even though, as she states, “The black slots of their pupils take me in,” she feels as if she is “being mailed into space” (Plath, *CP* 167). Similarly to the mussels in “Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor” shutting the female out of

their “muddy world,” the sheep fail to affirm her identity. They take her in, but do not seem to recognize or acknowledge her. This lack of recognition leaves her isolated and alienated.

In both “Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor” and “Wuthering Heights” Plath anthropomorphizes the non-human animal images in a last-ditch effort at retaining an association between female and non-human. In “Wuthering Heights,” the sheep are “in grandmotherly disguise, / All wig curls and yellow teeth” (Plath, *CP* 167). In “Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor,” the speaker wonders, “Could they [crabs] feel mud / Pleasurable under claws // As I could between bare toes?” (Plath, *CP* 96); however, even this final effort at creating an association with the non-human fails as she “St[ands] shut out, for once, for all” (Plath, *CP* 96).

Because the speaker remains unable to identify with the non-human, she reduces the animal images to objects. In “Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor,” the speaker finds the “husk of a fiddler-crab, / Intact, strangely strayed above // His world of mud” (Plath, *CP* 97). Like the skeleton of the “museum-cased lady,” in death, the crab “husk” is an object, a “samurai death mask” (Plath, *CP* 97). Atwood argues in *Survival* that the alienation of humans in literature typically reflects the status they scribe to Nature: “the result of a dead or indifferent Nature is an isolated or ‘alienated’ man” (54). Therefore, identifying with another victimized, alienated image only emphasizes one’s own isolation.

Again, in “Blue Moles,” Plath anthropomorphizes the remnants of dead animals in an attempt to forge a connection between speaker and non-human. “Blue Moles” was written in 1959 after Plath and Hughes stumbled upon two dead moles on a trail near their temporary home at the Yaddo writers’ colony (Butscher 248).²⁰ The first of the poem’s two sections is merely an observation of the moles, where they are objectified

²⁰ Plath and Hughes lived at Yaddo, an artists’ community located in Saratoga Springs, New York, from September 10, 1959 until late November (Stevenson 162).

like the “husk” of the crab. In the second part, however, the speaker inhabits the mole corpses in an attempt to understand her own identity. Although some critics, such as Rosenblatt, argue that entering the moles “suggests [a] liberation Plath achieves through identification” (*SP: The Poetry of Initiation* 76), by tracing the pronouns through her journey, it becomes clear that the speaker remains quite separate from these animals, therefore negating any “liberation” of an identity. The female is unable to secure an independent “true self” because the moles are dead. Whereas in “Stings” and “Ariel” there will be a mythological implication of transcendence through death, these moles remain “real” animals and rebirth is not an option.

The speaker identifies with the non-human animal image first of all as a “Little victim” (Plath, *CP* 126). The moles, “bitten by bad nature” (Plath, *CP* 126), allude to a similar victimized fate of women, “bitten” by the “dictates of biology” (Atwood 37). The protagonist observes, “two / Moles dead in the pebbled rut, / Shapeless as flung gloves, a few feet apart - / Blue suede a dog or fox has chewed” (Plath, *CP* 126). In death, their identity as animals has vanished; they are hollowed out, reduced to “flung gloves.” In section two, this relationship between the speaker and the moles becomes complicated. Initially, it seems as though she has succeeded in identifying or even fusing with the dead animals, stating, “I enter the soft pelt of the mole” (Plath, *CP* 126). However, tracking the pronouns it becomes clear that she remains separate from them:

Nightly the battle-shouts start up
 In the ear of the veteran, and again
 I enter the soft pelt of the mole.
 Light’s death to them: they shrivel in it.
 They move through their mute room while I sleep,
 Palming the earth aside, grubbers
 After the fat children of root and rock.
 By day, only the topsoil heaves.

Down there one is alone. (Plath, *CP* 126)

Although at the beginning of the poem, she is seemingly inside the mole, as the poem continues this changes as she observes, “*they* shrivel,” “*They* move through *their* mute room” (emphasis added). Even though she originally connects her identity with theirs, they quickly separate and while they move “[d]own there”, she sleeps above, seemingly unaware of and unable to identify with their underworld.

The ambiguity of the final lines leaves questions as to whether a third, masculine figure has reappeared: “What happens between us / Happens in darkness, vanishes / Easy and often as each breath” (Plath, *CP* 127). Does the “us” imply the speaker and the moles, or the speaker’s relationship with a lover? Either way, there is isolation in what is happening as it only “Happens in darkness” and then vanishes. If we take the “us” to imply the speaker and a partner, Plath verifies that his presence is fugitive as he, along with the relationship, “vanishes” in “darkness” (Plath, *CP* 127). Continuing to identify with victimized animals will only perpetuate the speaker’s own victimization. In order to transcend her victim “false self,” she must associate herself with a powerful, non-victimized animal.

Part II:

Towards Transcendence

In tracing the correlation between Plath’s life and her poetry, Bundtzen acknowledges, “virtually every major crisis or new joy signaled a birth into a new state of being and a sense of authoring a new person or persona” (*The Other Ariel* 102). In October 1962, Plath found herself faced with the reality of a new life without Hughes, as illustrated in a letter written to her mother: “It [her marriage] is *over*. My life can begin” (October 12, 1962, *LH* 466). Her failed marriage signified an unsuccessful attempt at

maintaining a traditional domestic partnership, but also opened up the possibility of escaping a role that had threatened to limit her creative output. Although Plath was frightened at the prospect of surviving without Hughes's influence, in some ways she was excited at the possibility of creating a revised and completely independent identity.

It is not until the poems written during or after October 1962, many included in the publication of *Ariel*, that a female non-victim successfully emerges. In a forward to *Ariel*, Robert Lowell comments on the reversal of gender expectations enacted by many of Plath's heroines, stating, "almost everything we customarily think of as feminine is turned on its head" (qtd. in Juhasz 85). Prior to *Ariel*, Plath's female figures tend to remain victimized, maintaining a role in the traditional gendered framework, where women are inactive and passive, and men are active and aggressive. However, once her marriage with Hughes disintegrates, and she faces life on her own, Plath's poetics begin to challenge the role of the passive, domesticated female. By employing the non-human animal image as her poetic prosthesis, Plath explores and then challenges the typical 1950s ideal of femininity. Beginning with the image of the queen bee and concluding with the horse and lioness, Plath once again takes on gendered animals, this time utilizing them to revise her feminine identity.

Kroll's main source for mythology rests in Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, which presents the Triple Moon-goddess figure and argues that it is the grounding mythology and psychological source of all poetry (Kroll 50). Graves argues that the Triple Moon-goddess is the source of all poetry because it is associated with poetic inspiration and "encodes some phase in the life, death, and rebirth cycle" (Kroll 50). There is an undeniable element of a journey through life, death, and rebirth within Plath's poetry, which is where the mythic self-transformation solidifies. This is why, Rose

argues, Kroll so closely aligns the White Goddess mythology with Plath (Rose 153). Without the mythic, Plath's female figure is unable to successfully complete this cycle.

The Bee Poems

During the week beginning October 3 and culminating October 9, 1962, Plath composed the five bee poems that she planned to have conclude *Ariel*: "The Bee Meeting," "The Arrival of the Bee Box," "Stings," "The Swarm," and "Wintering."²¹ Poetically, the bee sequence begins the transformation of Plath's heroine from a victimized self (a "false self" in Kroll's terms) towards an empowered and independent self ("true self"). By planning to conclude *Ariel* with the bee sequence, Plath is acknowledging a transformation towards independent female survival (Van Dyne 101). While there is undoubtedly the intimation of a journey towards transcendence, unlike poems such as "Lady Lazarus," "Ariel," and "Purdah" where the female figure is overtly aggressive, in the bee poems female "rage and vengeance-seeking are muted" (Bundtzen, *The Other Ariel* 109). Although these poems do point towards a "true self," the journey is beset with ambiguity and inconclusiveness. Throughout all of the poems, even "Stings," which stands as the most obviously triumphant of the poems, the speaker faces uncertainties regarding her place and identity as a woman.

Exploring the imagery of the beehive and rehearsing the various roles that it offers, Plath is able to imagine different feminine identities, and ultimately to affirm: "I am no drudge" (Plath, *CP* 214). Bundtzen considers the ambivalent implications of the bee imagery, explaining that "the bee colony offers a double image of femininity – the queen creator-destroyer and the dust-eating worker – adequate to Plath's conflicted feelings toward her womanhood and her own creative powers as an artist" (*Plath's*

²¹ Hughes did not honor this plan in his publication of the poems (Van Dyne 101).

Incarnations 186). In *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems*, Van Dyne argues that through the bee poems, Plath "began to articulate a new poetics," which "oscillated between dismantling a poetics in which she was fertile partner to Hughes's genius and articulating a new vision of the female poet as singular" (99-100). By employing the bee image Plath enables an exploration of the position and role of both the "drudge" and the "queen."

During September 1962, Plath began breaking away from her previous role as a "traditional" female. In a letter Plath's midwife, Winifred Davies, sent to Plath's mother, Aurelia, about Plath's marital problems, she attributes the failure of the marriage to her inability to remain domestic, claiming that she had become too dominant in the household (Bundtzen, *The Other Ariel* 114). The combination of her "dominance" in the household and Hughes's actual departure from their home, translates into her poetics, becoming the foundation of her bee sequence. Unlike the poems discussed in the previous chapter, where Plath utilizes the animal image to negotiate the male-female relationship, here, Plath's use of the bee image begins to act as a vehicle to distance the speaker from the male figure and from the gendered dichotomy previously evident.

Because of the ubiquity of the bee image throughout the entire sequence, these five poems are typically considered a unified suite. However, besides including bees, "The Swarm" reveals few additional connections to the other four poems and therefore it will not be a primary focus of my discussion.²² Unlike the other poems, that continue to explore the speaker's relationship with the bees and beehive, "The Swarm" does not focus on the female figure. Instead, it utilizes the beehive as a metaphor for Napoleon's Grand Army, perhaps to explore Plath's political distress at the time (Bundtzen, *The Other Ariel* 138). Because of the overt political and historical implications of this poem,

²² Plath hesitated in putting "The Swarm" with the other poems because she realized how different it was (Bundtzen, *The Other Ariel* 17).

it is not as crucial to the heroine's journey towards a revised identity as it concerns me here.

In "The Bee Meeting," "The Arrival of the Bee Box," "Wintering," and "Stings" the previous association of the feminine subject and animal image undergoes a transformation. Whereas the association in, most notably, "The Rabbit Catcher" and "Pursuit," identifies the woman as victimized prey, the bee poems signify a change in Plath's poetics as she begins to disassemble this common gendered construction. With many of her previous uses of animals, Plath's anthropomorphizing tends to uphold the gender that the animal is typically ascribed: prey associated with the female figures, and predators associated with the male figures. However, by employing the bee image, specifically the queen, as a poetic vehicle for her speaker's identity, Plath disrupts a clear-cut division between a "masculine" and "feminine" animal.

It is not surprising that Plath employs the bee image to explore her heroine's identity and place. Bees had been a central part of her life, which she in turn integrated into her work. Plath's father, Otto, a well-respected entomologist, introduced her to bees at an early age. Even though Otto died when Plath was only eight years old, the influence of his bees remained important to her (Butscher 3).²³ Otto Plath, like his daughter in these poems, was fascinated with the role of the queen, which he explored in his well-regarded book, *Bumblebees and Their Ways* (Alexander 22).²⁴ However, much of its success is because its examination of bees is not addressed exclusively to the scientific community. In *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath*, Paul Alexander points out that, "in his own introduction, Plath [Otto] tried to humanize the book's subject matter by tracing the genesis of his curiosity about bumblebees" (21). By relating bumblebees back to humans,

²³ Towards the end of her life, Plath took over her father's beekeeper role, becoming a beekeeper herself (Butscher 66).

²⁴ "In time, *Bumblebees and Their Ways* would become, in the estimation of both lay and scientific audiences, nothing short of a landmark study in the field of entomology, a watershed for future biologists" (Alexander 22).

his study was made more accessible. Plath continues this practice in the bee poems by not only using her father's expertise but also continuing to relate the animal image back to humans.

Although Plath utilizes the entire bee community to explore the speaker's position, the queen bee (arguably "a totem of the protagonist" for Plath) becomes the most significant figure for the successful emergence of the "true self" (Kroll 138). In *Survival*, Atwood discusses the importance of an animal's characteristics for a writer, arguing that "very rarely is an animal liked or disliked for itself alone; it is chosen for its symbolic anthropomorphic values" (79). Atwood further asserts that humans tend to identify with animals they can easily associate with their own lives; therefore, traditionally women associate themselves with docile, domesticated, prey animals and men with strong, wild, virile, predatory animals (79). Perhaps this is why Plath chooses the queen bee as *her* symbol. The bees, Bundtzen argues, "allegorize Plath's fears that she would lose 'her individuality' and become a 'honey-drudger,' another 'unmiraculous housewife,' if she were to become similarly 'hived' in caring only for her home and children" (*The Other Ariel* 106). The queen is both independent aggressor, and domestic mother, encapsulating qualities traditionally considered both masculine and feminine, and enabling Plath to explore fully both of these positions.

Because the queen bee exhibits characteristics associated with both genders, it becomes a complex, yet seemingly perfect symbol for Plath. Entomologists consider the queen a "perfect female" because she has the ability to "start a new hive independently" (Kroll 149). However, when viewing the queen bee as a representation of gender identity, this becomes problematic. The queen bee is not regarded as "perfect" because of any "feminine" characteristics she may have, but because of her independence, a trait typically associated with masculinity. Essentially, the "feminine" animal is only

considered to be of value, or “perfect,” if it exhibits masculine characteristics. Referring to Carolyn Heilbrun’s book, *Reinventing Womenhood*, Gardiner claims that, “successful women are ‘male-identified’” (347). This construction is unavoidable, however, because, as de Beauvoir recognizes, “the world is masculine on the whole; those who fashioned it, ruled it, and still dominate it today are men” (629). If any figure, human or non-human, begins to progress from victimized to powerful or aggressive, because masculinity is considered the dominant gender, that figure will be seen as taking on masculine traits. The queen bee’s sexually aggressive mating habits also maintain a resemblance to masculinity:

Apiarists tell us that the mate of the queen – chosen from thousands of suitors who pursue her high-spiraling nuptial flight – lives for a single moment of delight. But...as he impregnates the queen, his abdomen slits open, loosing the entrails which the queen then totes behind her as a kind of triumphal banner. Dispensable (his death required for propagation of the hive), the mate falls to earth as a carcass. The queen sports her murderous trophy, proof she has guaranteed the future of the hive. (Broe, “Enigmatical, Shifting My Clarities” 91)

For Plath, the “sexually normal woman,” as presented in the 1950s, was “naturally passive in disposition and exclusively procreative in ambition” (Van Dyne 69). By employing the queen bee, which disrupts the “passivity” considered appropriate for women, Plath begins to revise sexual identity.

Although this already undermines some of the common roles of the female, the role of the queen is more complex still. As Bundtzen points out, Plath’s identification with the queen bee “is not without ambivalence, because the queen, although she rules the hive, is also owned by it, [she is] subject to its laws” (*Plath’s Incarnations* 181). The queen’s role in the hive is to keep it alive by producing eggs. She is the source of all life in the hive, essentially an egg laying machine (Bundtzen, *The Other Ariel* 150). As an

egg laying machine she embodies the ideology of the domestic female, with her main role of maintaining the survival of the home.

These competing characteristics embodied in a single animal image convincingly demonstrate the struggle of Plath and her female speaker to find their way among feminine roles. Plath was in constant negotiation between her various roles as a wife, mother, and writer. Perhaps because the queen exhibits characteristics of both genders, she is not just a "perfect female," but also a perfect poetic animal figure. However, in the "struggle to escape death-in-life or the false self" the queen sheds her feminine characteristics, leaving the domesticity of her wax house and ascending to a mythological state of being, rising, like a red phoenix in "Stings" (Kroll 138).

The heroine's journey begins with "The Bee Meeting," which demonstrates the connection between vulnerability and nakedness. Distinctive clothing or lack thereof hinders the speaker's ability to define her place within the beekeepers' meeting and their rituals, thereby also impeding a progression towards an independent female identity. In "My Name Is Darkness": The Poetry of Self-Definition," Sandra Gilbert argues that "the female poet's second self...is associated with...her rage against imposed definitions, her creative passions, her anxiety, and-yes-her art" (451). In "The Arrival of the Bee Box," Plath begins to address her "second self" in relation to these particular roles, and especially her art as a writer. Although the speaker owns the contents of the bee box, like owning her internal thoughts, she is unable to discern these contents exactly, leaving her questioning her own safety should they escape. "Stings" is the most triumphant poem in the series, where Plath once more acknowledges the traditional female roles and the implications of nakedness; however here the female breaks past these barriers and emerges as a phoenix figure. Although, as the final poem in the series, "Wintering" is not as overtly triumphant as "Stings," it continues to focus on the journey of the female self

and culminates with the hope of spring. Although each of these poems functions independently, as a sequence they allow us to trace the journey of the speaker towards a refashioned identity.

“The Bee Meeting” describes the initial stage of the speaker as being subordinate, and forced to conform and construct her identity from external influences. Unlike the speakers in the poems that follow, she remains distant and excluded from the beekeeping world. The bee meeting brings a realization of her vulnerable place within society, as a woman. Through the ritual of removing the virgin bees from one hive, to separate them from the queen and move them to a new hive, Plath explores the influence of external forces on female identity. For both the speaker and the queen bee, survival is ensured (although even this is a survival of a “false self,” as Kroll would argue) only by conforming as well as covering or hiding their bodies.

Like the influence of male dominance on the position of the female, the presence of “the villagers” immediately manifests the speaker’s alienation, as she asks, “Who are these people at the bridge to meet me?” (Plath, *CP* 211). Although a “meeting” might imply a sense of inclusion, the speaker is separate from the group of “villagers.” Plath’s selection of “The rector, the midwife, [and] the sexton,” all public agents for marriage, birth and death, provides the framework for the journey the heroine will endure on her way towards a rebirth of the self.²⁵

The initial uncertainty of the speaker’s position brought on by the villagers intensifies with the realization that her bare body only furthers this isolation:

In my sleeveless summery dress I have no protection,
And they are all gloved and covered, why did nobody tell me?

²⁵ Plath attended local gatherings, which were undoubtedly the inspiration for “The Bee Meeting.” In a letter to her mother, Plath writes, “today, guess what, we became *beekeepers*! We went to the local meeting last week (attended by the rector, the midwife, and assorted beekeeping people from neighboring villages) to watch a Mr. Pollard make three hives out of one (by transferring his queen cells)” (letter to Aurelia Plath, June 15, 1962, *LH* 457).

They are smiling and taking out veils tacked to ancient hats. (Plath, *CP* 211)

Her nakedness, in her “sleeveless summery dress,” threatens her in two ways. First, unable to forge a connection with the non-human, she has “no protection” from the bees. Secondly, unfamiliar with this beekeeping ritual, she is socially alienated from the townspeople who are “gloved and covered.” Essentially, in her “sleeveless summery dress,” she bares herself, becoming “somehow indecent, sexually available” (Brain 70).

In “The Big Strip Tease: Female Bodies and Male Power in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath,” Kathleen Lant argues that male and female writers convey nakedness differently. She argues that throughout literary history, the naked male body typically represents “joyous transcendence, freedom, [and] power,” while female nudity commonly represents “another barrier between the self and the world” (624).²⁶ The speaker’s naked arms are a barrier to her inclusion and acceptability within the town. In confronting her alienation, she asks, “why did nobody tell me?” (Plath, *CP* 211). She remains an Other, excluded by the townspeople, naked and vulnerable. Her bareness becomes ridiculous as she claims that she is “nude as a chicken neck” (Plath, *CP* 211). Unlike the freedom and power, which Lant argues is associated with male nudity, the female body is likened to part of a dead domestic animal primarily used for food. Questioning her place and importance, she asks, “does nobody love me?” (Plath, *CP* 211). It will not be until “Ariel,” where Plath alludes to the mythic image of Lady Godiva, that she will completely reverse the traditional association between female nudity and Otherness.

For the speaker, covering her body means inclusion and therefore survival. The speaker is only included when her body is properly covered: “here is the secretary of bees with her white shop smock, / Buttoning the cuffs at my wrists and the slit from my neck to my knees” (Plath, *CP* 211). Once covered, buttoned, and essentially imprisoned by the

²⁶ The poetry of Walt Whitman and the Beat poets (Plath’s contemporaries) emphasizes nakedness as a way to bare the body and expose the soul, signifying rebirth (Lant 621).

“smock,” she is accepted. By remaining naked and refusing to conform, she would confirm her position as an alienated Other. The speaker states, “Now they are giving me a fashionable white straw hat / And a black veil that molds to my face, they are making me one of them” (Plath, *CP* 211). Through this ritual that includes marriage, birth, and death, as signified by the presence of the rector, the midwife, and the sexton, she covers her body, and with it her femininity, and becomes “one of them.”

While providing the speaker with “protection” in facing the beehives, this clothing also masks her identity. The “black veil[s],” “white shop smock[s],” “cuffs,” and “visors” all distort the real identities of the villagers (Plath, *CP* 211). Unable to identify individuals, the speaker asks, “Which is the rector now, is it that man in black? / Which is the midwife, is that her blue coat?” (Plath, *CP* 211). By masking their bodies with the clothing needed for the bee ritual, they become a collective unit resembling worker bees in a hive, which subsequently causes them to lose their individuality.

The focus of the poem soon shifts away from the villagers and towards the queen bee as the hunt for her commences. The villagers move the “virgins, [so] there will be no killing” of the “old queen” (Plath, *CP* 212). Because, as Van Dyne argues, “for both the aging queen and the dreaming virgins, the apex of female identity is the singular ‘bride flight,’” the virgins are a threat to the queen (106). The “bride flight” (or nuptial flight), which is the mating of the queen with a drone, threatens her. Bundtzen explains that once the queen mates with drones in a nuptial flight, losing her virginity, she will never again leave the hive (*The Other Ariel* 126). Therefore, as “the apex of female identity,” the “bride flight” acts to domesticate the queen, as she becomes a possession of the collective body of the hive. Like the speaker in her “sleeveless summery dress,” the queen is also vulnerable, and therefore, “does not show herself” (Plath, *CP* 212). Unable to transcend her “white hive,” the queen remains hidden so that she will “live another year” (Plath, *CP*

212). Once more, like the masking of the speaker's body, the queen's concealment ensures her survival, and she remains veiled, within a "curtain of wax" (Plath, *CP* 212).

Although the protagonist identifies with the non-human animal image, she continues to feel threatened (Rosenblatt, *SP: The Poetry of Initiation* 128). Because the bee ritual is real, and the births of the virgins threaten the queen, the speaker is unable to gain a sense of empowerment through association her. Even though the queen bee is considered the "perfect female," because she is unable to break free from her "white hive" she remains a victim of external constraints. As with the gendering of the predatory/prey dichotomy discussed in the previous chapter, the positions in "The Bee Meeting" are also gendered, with the speaker and queen in the prey role, while the villagers (patriarchy) are the hunters.

As the poem concludes, it is clear that the beekeeping ritual has not advanced the speaker in her quest for a more active subject position. While, as Kroll argues, "the speaker was prepared to undergo a ritual ordeal in order to realize her true self...the event turned out to be an act of surgery; instead of exorcising her false self, it excised her principle of vitality" (142). Although she has a brief association with the queen, which would typically imply a sense of power and independence, the queen bee hides behind a "curtain of wax," so that this association lends little more than a reinforced sense of victimization. Because the female figures are unable to bare their bodies, they remain feminine and therefore reliant on external forces to determine their fate and safety, which hinders their ability to attain identities as "perfect females."

In "The Arrival of the Bee Box," the second poem in the sequence, Plath intensifies her focus on the place and role of the female figure. Here, a stronger sense of self emerges through the speaker's ownership of a "clean wood box" full of *her* bees (Plath, *CP* 212). With the image of her bees captured in a box, Plath explores the conflict

between the domestic female and the creative female. According to Bundtzen, “Plath seems to be confronting the problem of poetic identity” (*The Other Ariel* 133). The speaker’s continual meditation on whether or not she should release the contents of the box alludes to the possibility of freeing her inner thoughts and creativity. She realizes that by releasing them, she risks challenging the traditional construction of femininity.

Although the male figure has departed the scene, leaving the speaker independent and seemingly in control of her own actions — “I ordered this, this clean wood box” — the contents of the box threaten her position, thereby limiting this control (Plath, *CP* 212). Van Dyne refers to the relationship the speaker has with the contents of the box as a “poetic pregnancy,” arguing that “the speaker experiences frightening, uneasy intuitions” as the “unknown interior harbors dreadful possibilities” (106). Even though she owns the bee box,

The box is locked, it is dangerous.
I have to live with it overnight
And I can’t keep away from it.
There are no windows, so I can’t see what is in there.
There is only a little grid, no exit. (Plath, *CP* 213)

According to Kroll, in Plath’s later poetry the heroine experiences an “intolerable state of being,” whereby she realizes the “coexistence of false and true selves – the feeling of being at once helpless and trapped while truly powerful and free” (11). Even though the speaker recognizes the danger, and dreads being overcome by her “true,” creative self, she “can’t keep away from it,” and continues to be drawn to the thought of release. Existing in both domestic and creative realms, Plath was constantly negotiating between these two conflicting roles. De Beauvoir argues that “shut up in the home, woman cannot herself establish her existence; she lacks the means requisite for self-affirmation as an individual; and in consequence her individuality is not given recognition” (553).

Although Plath maintained a role in the domestic realm as a wife and mother, like the “noise” of “unintelligible syllables” in this poem, her inner creativity continued to threaten this role with its release (Plath, *CP* 213).

As witnessed in “The Bee Meeting,” because the speaker is influenced by the villagers and conforms to their expectations, she relinquishes her individuality and therefore her creativity. Kroll describes Graves’s explication of the Muse as a “woman who is a threat to domesticity” (76). Kroll goes on to explain that “because the Muse does not willingly remain captive, the power of inspiration will desert the wife who has turned domestic” (76). The speaker realizes that if she does not let the “swarmy,” “angrily clambering” bees out of the box, “They can die” (Plath, *CP* 213). Without creative inspiration, “feed[ing] them nothing,” her inner self will expire (Plath, *CP* 213). By perpetuating her identity as defined within domesticity, she risks smothering her inner Muse (Kroll 48).

Although this is a progression from “The Bee Meeting,” as the speaker in “The Arrival of the Bee Box” recognizes both the “false” and “true self” within her, she remains ambivalent about releasing her “true self.” Realizing the possible danger her inner self can cause, the speaker states, “I have simply ordered a box of maniacs” with the “feeling of African hands” (Plath, *CP* 213). In implying that these are Africanized bees, which have a more “aggressive nature,” Plath emphasizes the potential danger of the contents of the box (Bundtzen, *The Other Ariel* 135).

Like the stings of bees, female creativity can also cause harm. Yet, in the final stanzas the speaker promises, “Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free. // The box is only temporary” (Plath, *CP* 213). Unlike “The Bee Meeting,” where the speaker’s negotiation of an independent identity seems stalled, in “The Arrival of the Bee Box” she makes progress towards an independent self. However, this promise to “free” the contents

of the box does not come without complications. Like the masculine characteristics of the queen bee that ultimately enable transcendence in "Stings," here the speaker must take on a masculine role, as "sweet God," in order to "set them free." She will essentially "*be* sweet God," relinquishing part of her own identity and taking on another (emphasis added). Even though these implications of masculinity complicate her position, there is an undeniable progression towards a revised self, as she concludes in stating, "The box is only temporary." The "false self" is temporary and will be removed, as proven in "Stings," "Ariel," and "Purdah."

Kroll argues that the representation and connection between the speaker and the queen in both "The Bee Meeting" and "Stings" "identify her true self with queenship" (148). However, the association between the speaker and the queen bee in "The Bee Meeting" is not successful in terms of allowing her "true self" to emerge. It is not until "Stings" that the animal image becomes a successful vehicle for the discovery of a "true self." By identifying with "queenship," she recovers a revised, powerful female identity. Rosenblatt argues that in the journey towards transcendence, Plath develops a three-part structure where there is an entry into darkness, followed by a ritual death, and ending with the rebirth of the female self ("SP: Drama of Initiation" 23). This three-part structure is especially evident in the transformation which the subject undergoes between "Wintering," where there is "No light" and she is in the "dark without [a] window," and "Stings," where there is a ritual death followed by a rebirth (Plath, *CP* 218).

In "Stings" Plath portrays another bee meeting; however this time the villagers are absent and only the speaker and the bee seller are present. Unlike the vulnerability and isolation associated with female speaker's nakedness in "The Bee Meeting," here the speaker is "Bare handed," stating, "I hand the combs" (Plath, *CP* 214). The lack of protection she felt in her "sleeveless summery dress" (Plath, *CP* 211) has vanished; the

"throats of our wrists" are now "brave lilies" (Plath, *CP* 214). The pronoun "our" implies complicity between these two figures; both are "bare-handed." The speaker is included in the ritual, but she has also gained a power that is evident in the definitive use of "I."

Here, the speaker is performing the action, whereas in "The Bee Meeting" she was merely the observer of a ritual enacted by "they" and "them."

Through the beehive imagery, Plath presents two distinct female roles: the queen and the drudge. Initially, the queen is not glorified; rather she is "old, / Her wings torn shawls, her long body / Rubbed of its plush - / Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful" (Plath, *CP* 214). The speaker then identifies herself with the "Honey-drudges": "I stand in a column / Of winged, unmiraculous women" (Plath, *CP* 214). However, she then dissociates herself from the drudges, affirming, "I am no drudge / Though for years I have eaten dust / And dried plates with my dense hair" (Plath, *CP* 214). It is here, through these two representations, that the "false" and "true" selves are most clearly illustrated. The drudges are the workers, maintaining the "wax house" (Plath, *CP* 215). They are "winged," and although Plath states they are "unmiraculous," this is paradoxical, as a winged woman is miraculous (Ford 151). Because they are equipped with wings, transcending their domestic duties and leaving their "wax house" is a possibility. According to Kroll, the recovery of the "true self" "signals the rejection of the role of the 'drudge'" (149); therefore, in order for the "unmiraculous" woman to shed her "false self," she must employ her wings to transcend the mundane and enter into the mythological.

De Beauvoir claims that "for a great many women the roads to transcendence are blocked: because they *do* nothing, they fail to *make themselves* anything. They wonder indefinitely what they *could have* become, which sets them to asking about what they *are*" (273). Through her heroine, Plath seeks to overcome this blockage, rejecting the

place of the drudge, and asserting, "I am in control" (Plath, *CP* 214). By associating with the queen bee, Plath's heroine refuses to "*do nothing*" and begins to force herself towards transcendence and towards defining a more autonomous identity.

Even though "A third person is watching," the speaker has taken control and can therefore claim, "He has nothing to do with the bee-seller or with me" (Plath, *CP* 215). With a new sense of identity and power, the presence of a male is irrelevant and holds no sway over the speaker's quest for a revised self. Here, as the bees align with the heroine, the affinity between woman and non-human is re-established. By contrast, the non-human now turns against the male figure: "The bees found him out, / Molding onto his lips like lies, / Complicating his features" (Plath, *CP* 215). This element of the poem was most likely influenced by an experience Plath and Hughes had when they moved their own hives. In a letter to Aurelia, Plath writes: "Ted had only put a handkerchief over his head where the hat should go in the bee-mask, and the bees crawled into his hair, and he flew off with half-a-dozen stings" (Plath, June 15, 1962, *LH* 457). The attack of the bees dispels this male scrutiny: "Now he is gone" (Plath, *CP* 215).

Once the male figure vanishes for the final time, the heroine refocuses her attention on her quest for rebirth, stating, "I / Have a self to recover, a queen" (Plath, *CP* 215). Kroll argues that for Plath,

the true self [is] most often revealed in the process of awakening from or overthrowing a state of suppression [and] is usually seen as coexisting with the false self: the lioness masked by the doll-bride in 'Purdah'; the queen bee sleeping in the guise of a drudge, a worker bee, in 'Stings.'" (11)

Therefore, Plath's heroines must recognize the internal presence of their "true self" before they can transcend the "false self." Although previously hidden "in a column // Of winged, unmiraculous women," the speaker now realizes that the queen is present and asks, "Is she dead, is she sleeping? / Where has she been...?" (Plath, *CP* 214-215). By

realizing her “true self” through the queen, the speaker completes her transcendence and recovers her inner self. Showing her “lion-red body, her wings of glass,” she rises (Plath, *CP* 215):

Now she is flying
 More terrible than she ever was, red
 Scar in the sky, red comet
 Over the engine that killed her –
 The mausoleum, the wax house. (Plath, *CP* 215)

By employing the image of the queen bee, Plath’s heroine successfully transcends her previous position, revealing a revised identity. Through this flight, the speaker leaves the domestic “wax house” and completely reverses the typical feminine roles.

This transcendence has led not only to the female figure’s revised identity but also to the transformation of the queen bee, as she resembles, with her “lion-red body,” a phoenix. Through this transcendence, the “true self” is revealed for the first time. Flying above the “engine that killed her - / The mausoleum, the wax house,” the “imprisoned artist figure and muse” is released from domesticity (Bundtzen, *The Other Ariel* 148). Unlike the representation of the queen bee in “The Bee Meeting,” hidden behind a “wax curtain,” this queen, with the death of her “false self,” is fully visible.

In the same way that she uses the queen bee’s rebirth as a “red / Scar in the sky,” in “Lady Lazarus” (1962), written later that October, Plath continues to explore the “cyclical pattern of dying and reviving” (Kroll 118). Plath employs the biblical figure of Lazarus, who dies and then is reborn; however, Plath revises this myth, as her Lazarus is a woman. By the conclusion, a dominant female figure once again emerges by means of flight, as a phoenix, carrying the speaker towards transcendence as she states, “Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air” (Plath, *CP* 247). Kroll explains that the phoenix symbol is self-generating and “although as a Sun-bird the phoenix may

traditionally be male, Plath...sees it as female" (119). Upsetting the typical gendered model, whereby the male consumes the female, Plath's heroine "eat[s] men like air."²⁷ Through revisionist mythmaking and by employing an animal that disrupts conventional gender roles, Plath's female is able to emerge, consume men, and reclaim "her vitality as a sexual being" (Bundtzen, *The Other Ariel* 117). The female is now "More terrible than she ever was," rising and consuming "men like air." Although domesticity may have "killed her" "false self," this death allows for the transcendence of a powerful independent revised identity. She has secured her role as the "perfect female."

In "Wintering," the box has vanished and the female bees begin to face the challenge of a world without male influence, as the female bees "ball in a mass" to survive the winter (Plath, *CP* 218). While writing "Wintering," Plath herself was facing another winter in Devon, this time without Hughes (Bundtzen, *The Other Ariel* 155). Bundtzen points out that on the reverse side of one of Plath's drafts for "Wintering" is a draft page of *The Bell Jar*, where Plath writes: "I could feel the winter shaking my bones and banging my teeth together" (qtd. in *The Other Ariel* 155). Although the thought of facing a winter alone loomed over Plath's head, "Wintering" provides a message of survival and hope. The poem begins with the speaker stating,

I have whirled the midwife's extractor
I have my honey,
Six jars of it,
Six cat's eyes in the wine cellar. (Plath, *CP* 217)²⁸

She has "her honey" that her female worker bees have produced, which alludes to the success of independent female creativity and productivity. To refer to the honey as "cat's eyes" suggests that female production provides the power of vision. By removing the bee

²⁷ Refer to previous discussion on "Pursuit" (pg. 21), "Zoo Keeper's Wife" (pg. 32), and "Totem" (pg. 25) in Chapter I for the traditional representation.

²⁸ The quantity of "six" "may refer to the number of poems written over the summer, as a poetic harvest of sorts, or to the first six years of her marriage" (Bundtzen, *The Other Ariel* 154).

box that was stifling the speaker's "true self" in "The Arrival of the Bee Box," the heroine gains creative vision and a plausible chance of survival as an independent female figure.

It is "Tate and Lyle" that "keeps them going," and "It is Tate and Lyle they live on, instead of flowers" (Plath, *CP* 218). By including Tate and Lyle, a UK sugar company, Plath's sense of the mythic begins to emerge. On the label of Lyle's Golden Syrup, is a picture of a lion, a swarm of bees, and a quotation from the story of Sampson. On his journey in search for a wife Sampson killed a lion and, on returning, found that a swarm of bees had formed a comb of honey in the lion's carcass. At this, Sampson proclaimed: "out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness" (Judges 14:14). Although considered extraordinarily strong and seemingly untouchable by his enemies, Sampson was eventually betrayed by his lover, Delilah who, in cutting his hair, removed his strength and sealed his fate at the hands of the Philistines. Here, Plath's bees consume Sampson's allegory, and from their strength in winter comes the sweetness of the honey. In addition, like Delilah, Plath has removed the male figure, excising him and replacing him with "all women" (Plath, *CP* 218).²⁹ The strength of the female bees prevails, as they are the only survivors in the harsh winter. Because the "women" "have got rid of the men, / The blunt, clumsy stumblers, the boors," they have reversed the common implication that females are weaker than men. Stating, "Winter is for women," the speaker announces her success in surviving in harsh conditions (Plath, *CP* 219).³⁰

However, even though the women are independent, the journey towards a "true self" fails. The speaker acknowledges that there is a "woman, still at her knitting" and

²⁹ During this time, Plath was also surrounding herself with women (Mrs. Prouty, her Aunt Dot, Winifred Davies, and other female friends) (Bundtzen, *The Other Ariel* 118).

³⁰ The departure of Hughes in early October correlates with the enforced leaving of Plath's drones (Bundtzen, *The Other Ariel* 153).

that “Her body [is] a bulb in the cold and too dumb to think” (Plath, *CP* 219). Although “Winter is for women,” this particular woman is unable fully to escape her place in domesticity: she continues “knitting.” Perhaps this acknowledges the persistence of Plath’s own ambivalence about her conflicting roles as a woman. This woman is “too dumb to think,” and therefore the hope of her finding an independent self is limited. With the reemergence of a domestic female, the survival of the female self is questioned, as the speaker asks, “Will the hive survive...?” (Plath, *CP* 219). Because domesticity is essentially a patriarchal role, with the reemergence of the domestic, the female hive is potentially in danger. However, although the female self fails to arrive at a *complete* transcendence, the “flying” of the bees as “They taste the spring” provides hope and the beginnings of an autonomous female self (Plath, *CP* 219).

God’s Lioness

Plath continued to write throughout the month of October at a seemingly inexhaustible rate, as she produced not only the bee sequence, but also many other poems that would go on to be among her most celebrated.³¹ Towards the end of the month, Plath completed “Ariel” and “Purdah,” both portraying a female figure associated with an animal or “animalness,” free from constraints of a “false self.” Because the typical position of the speaker has altered, her association with, and the identity of the animal changes. In Plath’s portrayal of female victim figures, the animals associated with them are also victims, typically presented as prey. In the few instances that she uses powerful, predatory animals, they tend to remain closely connected with the male figure. The bee poems mark Plath’s transition point, where the animal associated with the female figure exhibits many more “masculine” characteristics, and the female is no longer limited to

³¹ “Daddy” (12 October 1962), “Fever 103°” (20 October 1962), “Ariel” (27 October 1962), and “Lady Lazarus” (23-29 October 1962) are some of Plath’s most popular poems, typically used in poetry anthologies. Van Dyne describes these as “pivotal” and “major works” (57).

connecting with prey animals. According to Uroff, “the speaker in Plath’s poems, who before had typically presented herself as a servant, attendant, victim, exhausted or empty mind, now bursts forth on her own, casting off all bonds to announce her own energy and power” (145). In both “Ariel” and “Purdah” Plath takes the female-animal association further, by joining the identities of the woman and animal. In doing this, the animals’ independence as individual beings is lost. However, the outcome ensures female empowerment and rebirth as well as a complete reversal of traditional gendered symbols and characteristics.

In the same way that she uses the mythological queen bee to aid in the transcendence of the protagonist in “Stings,” in “Ariel” Plath employs a mythical horse to aid the female figure. Because horses are traditionally symbols of masculinity due to their power, by taking on a traditionally “masculine” animal and linking it with a female, she is able to escape the “darkness” of the patriarchy and rise towards the “red / Eye” as a non-victim (Plath, *CP* 239-240).

“Ariel” begins with “Stasis in darkness” (Plath, *CP* 239). The initial state that the speaker finds herself in acknowledges her inactive role, which is where many of Plath’s early female figures remain. However, this female subject is quickly thrust from “Stasis” towards violent movement and momentum as she becomes connected with her horse, Ariel, “God’s lioness” (Plath, *CP* 239). While some feminist critics argue that perpetuating the connection between woman and the non-human amounts to an acceptance of woman’s place as Other, perpetuating her victim status, the connection Plath makes in “Ariel” disproves this argument.³² Because both women and non-human animals share a similar place in the patriarchy, subject to control, domestication and oppression, they are inclined to break with tradition and move towards freedom (Barnard

³² In “The Nature of Race: Discourses of Racial Difference in Ecofeminism” Noël Sturgeon describes various positions within the feminist movement, one of which views the “equation of women and nature as patriarchal” and therefore problematic to the advancement and equality of women (264).

100-101). Through the connection between the protagonist and her horse, Plath confronts the traditional domestic sphere, ultimately disrupting it. According to Marian Scholtmeijer, when women write animal literature “they perform the most anti-androcentric of acts” and their becoming “wholly ‘other’” leads to female empowerment (233). Accepting the female’s place as Other and joining it with a powerful animal force results in liberation: the literary rebirth of a new identity and a representation of the Other as non-victim.

Away from the confines of “darkness” and in the “substanceless blue,” “God’s lioness” appears and the speaker states: “How one we grow” (Plath, *CP* 239). In this moment, the identities of woman and horse become “substanceless” as they join. The traditional boundaries that typically constrict the Other are dissolved as they “grow” into a “substanceless” realm, leaving the traditional behind. Unlike Hughes who “always remains at a safe distance from his animals” (Uroff 81), Plath essentially becomes the animal in “Ariel,” entering into the horse’s identity. As she rides, their bodies merge and there is a “Pivot of heels and knees!” (Plath, *CP* 239). The bodies of the two are indistinguishable, seen only as individual body parts (“heels” and “knees”). There is a sense of excitement with the joining of these two bodies, and there is a sense of escape as they ride away from “Stasis.” By entering the animal “Plath progressively obliterates the distance and difference between the speaker and the animal energy of her horse” (Van Dyne 119). While the connection between woman and animal is common throughout literature, Plath’s choice of animal is most significant because of its “symbolic anthropomorphic values” used to challenge traditional gender representations (Atwood 79).

The name Ariel has many meanings and connotations, most obviously recalling the spirit in Shakespeare’s *Tempest*. However, this is not the primary reference for Plath’s

use of the name. The traditional, Hebrew definition for Ariel is “*lion of God*,” which is a hidden name for Jerusalem, and therefore, because of Jesus’ death, alludes to “fiery sacrifice, purification, and transcendence” (Kroll 181). On this basis, Kroll argues that the speaker identifies “herself with Ariel as a fiery sacrifice [and] enacts her own ‘holocaust,’ becoming a ‘whole burnt-offering’” (181). In order for the female to succeed in attaining a revised “true self,” she must sacrifice her “false self.” The lion is a symbol of strength, power and virility, all commonly connected to masculinity (Cirlot 190). Plath displaces this traditional masculine symbol of the lion by feminizing it and making Ariel a “lioness,” symbolizing feminine power (Rowland 123).³³ By reclaiming the creative power that typically rests with masculinity, Plath asserts her own power and in doing so, is able to successfully alter the animal symbolism and claim it as her own.

Like the lion, the horse is also large in stature, endowed with brute strength and power, and is typically assumed to be masculine, commonly referred to using the pronoun “he.” This association with masculinity is further verified in that its phallus accounts for its “dominant role in myth [and] legend,” as a powerful symbol of male sexuality and virility (Rowland 103). By associating a woman with such a strong symbol for masculine strength and sexual potency, Plath redistributes these characteristics, creating a new feminine identity. If Plath were to have chosen a passive, docile animal for the female speaker to identify with, the progression towards non-victim status would be unsuccessful and, like many of her earlier poems, “Ariel” would have continued to uphold traditional gender constructions. It is in the “fusion of elements” such as the identities of woman, lion, lioness, and horse that traditional gender representations are disrupted and an empowered self created (Barnard 98).

³³ The lioness as a symbol of power rests in the myth of Sekhmet the “Powerful” who was not only portrayed with the head of a lioness but was a “terrible lady of war whose heart rejoiced when she slew men” (Garai 46). The Egyptian goddess, Bast, goddess of solar warmth and fertility, was a lioness as well (Garai 46).

Plath completely merges the identities of horse and woman, so that the heroine not only takes on the characteristics of the horse, but they become a part of her. In many of John Berger's articles, he argues that in the post-industrial world, animals have vanished; their identities are lost and they exist only as symbols or representations ("Vanishing Animals" 664-665). Because anthropomorphism is the principal way in which humans regard non-human animals, Berger claims that animals are in turn humanized and their non-human identity marginalized to the point where they exist primarily as machines ("Vanishing Animals" 664-665). Unlike the way in which Hughes maintains the complete "animalness" of a non-human animal, Plath's animals, especially in these later poems, are sacrificial. Plath takes the biblical reference of sacrifice to the extreme, not only with Ariel, but also with the queen bee and the lioness, as all act as poetic prostheses for her, enabling her female protagonist to dismantle her "false self." While the horse allows for the female's transcendence, because it is essentially a sacrifice for her rebirth it remains a "machine" and therefore associated with the Other.

By entering the animal, the female removes herself and escapes from the current position of the feminine. In growing into Ariel, the speaker takes on an active identity, as opposed to the inactivity of the domestic sphere. Through recognizing the connection, she chooses to "grow" with the horse and create a new self as opposed to a typical gendered one forced upon her. Although she may lose her identity as a woman, she gains power by employing an animal that has characteristics which are typically unattainable for women. Here, Plath employs Ariel to explore characteristics that many women may desire. By merging with the animal, the protagonist sheds her "feminine" characteristics and her attachment to that particular role, creating a new gendered space in society.

In the joining between woman and horse, the bodies become intertwined and indistinguishable. Plath does not include any feelings or emotions in "Ariel," only "heels

and knees," a "neck," "thighs and hair," which carry the protagonist towards a new identity. Like "White / Godiva," who rode naked through Coventry to reclaim power from her husband, the speaker in "Ariel" also rides to gain power, letting the body of the Other guide her. Although the naked female form is typically associated with vulnerability (as discussed in the context of the bee poems), the rider in "Ariel" disrupts this traditional representation, gaining power in the nude form and even taking it a step further, as she "unpeel[s]" her female body. Just as the lioness in "Purdah" helps the speaker to "unloose," here joining with the horse allows the heroine to "unpeel," fully discarding her "false self."

While the physical body carries her far, eventually she must "unpeel" the "Dead hands, dead stringencies," like Godiva shedding her clothes, she removes the final piece of feminine identity, resurrecting herself as a non-human (Plath, *CP* 239). While in the myth of Lady Godiva the image of the nude female remains in the object role, the heroine in "Ariel" takes an active role in "unpeel[ing]" the remaining physical remnants of her feminine identity and in so doing takes on the role of the subject.

Once the human body is removed she drives forward, leaving the "Stasis" and "darkness" of the domestic realm even though a "child's cry" is still present in her mind (Plath, *CP* 239). However, because she has actively removed the traditional feminine from her self, the cry "Melts in the wall" and the domestic ceases to be a threat to her progression towards a revised self (Plath, *CP* 239). For the speaker, the "child's cry" is the final interruption before attaining her non-victim status and since she has shed all that is traditionally considered feminine, she succeeds in refusing to return to the domestic by answering the "child's cry." While this abandonment is disturbing, especially when considering the biographical undertones of Plath's own suicide, it remains within the confines of a myth of self-transformation. Mythology is the only place where she can

overcome what Atwood describes as the “dictates of biology.” In order for the speaker’s transformation to occur the mythic animal is needed. Without the mythic role of Ariel the speaker would be unsuccessful in breaking away from the dictates of her biology and she would be destined to remain in “Stasis” within the domestic realm. It is only when the female figure merges with the mythic Ariel that the traditional feminine expires, and even though the domestic continues to threaten the pair on their journey towards rebirth, the momentum they attain defies the threats.

Immediately after the “child’s cry / Melts in the wall” she plunges forward and becomes associated with the phallus, stating “And I / Am the arrow” (Plath, *CP* 239). She is once more taking the active role and claiming the masculine for herself. Whereas the symbol of the horse implies a connection to the phallus, Plath furthers this association by employing an arrow image. An arrow is the shape of a phallus and when used, penetrates, making this connection stronger. She is now further removed from the realm of the domestic mother figure that the “child’s cry” reminds her of. In the final act of gender reversal she “flies / Suicidal, at one with the drive / Into the red / Eye, the cauldron of morning” (Plath, *CP* 240). Although this final movement of the rider and horse can be seen as a “death wish,” Kroll argues that her late poems “have the ambiguity of a simultaneous wish for rebirth” (12). There is a “death wish,” not because life is unacceptable, but because life as a woman, living in “darkness,” and living a life of the “false self” is intolerable (Kroll 12). With the combined identity of horse and arrow, the woman, acting as a phallic figure, flies towards and penetrates the “red / Eye” suggesting Plath’s female figure taking an active role in a mythic sexual act.

While the main focus of “Ariel” is arguably on the empowerment the female gains and the reversal of traditional gender roles, it is also about poetic energy and creation. Plath’s speaker states, “Something else / Hauls me through the air”: the non-

human animal energy is compelling Plath to continue using the animal force towards her own creativity. According to Northrop Frye in "The Drunken Boat: The Revolutionary Element in Romanticism," the "vehicular form", or "the sense of identity with a larger power of creative energy," is a common topos in the Romantic tradition (14-15). Frye argues that "the vehicular form is a heightened state of consciousness in which we feel that we are greater than we know," resulting in "an intense feeling of communion" (15). For Plath, the poetic animal image becomes a symbol for the speaker's "heightened state of consciousness." The animal as a "vehicular form," allows Plath, or at least her heroines, to transcend the possible limitations that the "dictates of biology" may impose. Frye goes on to argue that the "best Romantic poetry is mythopoeic" in that it "identifies the human with the nonhuman world" (15).³⁴ For Plath's speakers, transcendence depends upon their connection with the non-human world. Without this connection, the speaker is unable to arrive at a new sense of self.

Two days after Plath wrote "Ariel" she wrote "Purdah." Initially, "Purdah" seems to bear little resemblance to an "animal" poem; however, by the conclusion the mythic animal has emerged and, like Ariel, aids in the female speaker's self-transformation. In "Ariel," the quest for empowerment begins much earlier, remaining in the domestic "darkness" only briefly. However, in "Purdah" the female protagonist is plagued with the social isolation and exclusion of wearing a purdah, as well as being part of the domestic sphere for much longer, altering the main focal point.³⁵

As at the beginning of "Ariel," in "Purdah," the speaker is initially a victim, stating, "I am his" (Plath, *CP* 243). However, unlike in "Ariel," where the speaker remains in control of her self, the speaker in "Purdah" does not own her self, existing

³⁴ The mythopoeic tradition is opposed to rationalism and works towards myth making.

³⁵ A purdah is a veil or curtain that is traditionally used as a screen to seclude women (Kroll 157).

only in reference to her bridegroom. Even when the male is absent, the female exists only in terms of him (Kroll 156). In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir argues that,

shut up in the home, woman cannot herself establish her existence; she lacks the means requisite for self-affirmation as an individual; and in consequence her individuality is not given recognition. (553)

While initially this seems accepted by the speaker, by the conclusion of the poem she is no longer satisfied with being his “Doll he guards like a heart” (Plath, *CP* 244). It is in this instant, when the domestic sphere of the patriarchy becomes too much for the female, that she calls upon the connection between herself and an animal force to reveal “her hidden center of violence” and threaten the masculine presence in her life, thereby disrupting traditional gender roles (Kroll 18). By the end of the poem she “casts off her false, doll-like self and becomes a ‘lioness,’” and “it is clear that all along this true self has been latent” (Kroll 156). The lioness is employed to remove the mask of the “false self” and reveal the violence and rage of the previously hidden “true self.”

The speaker warns the “bridegroom” that “at his next step” her identity as a woman will disappear and that instead she will “unloose” a lioness (Plath, *CP* 243-244). As de Beauvoir argues, it is when the female is productive and active that she “regains her transcendence” (713). Because the lioness is feminine but embodies strength and power (typically associated with masculinity), it is not typically anthropomorphized in feminine terms. Plath utilizes this animal, like the horse, to disrupt traditional gender boundaries as the female protagonist takes on the identity of an atypical animal.

The threat to “unloose” and reveal a lioness, Kroll argues, is a direct reference to the mythic murder of Agamemnon at the hands of the vengeful Clytemnestra (157-158). As Kroll points out, “The Cassandra of Aeschylus, prophesying the event, calls Clytemnestra a ‘two-footed lioness’” (157-158). In the final lines of “Purdah,” Plath seeks to recapture this mythic murder:

I shall unloose –
 From the small jeweled
 Doll he guards like a heart –

The lioness,
 The shriek in the bath,
 The cloak of holes. (Plath, *CP* 244)

Through the myth of the “two-footed lioness,” Plath revisits Agamemnon’s surprise murder in the “bath.” Seeking revenge, the lioness’s claws create his “cloak of holes,” resembling the stab wounds Clytemnestra inflicted on her husband (Kroll 158). Although in the beginning of the poem the speaker’s identity seems fully dependent on the “bridegroom,” by its conclusion, like Clytemnestra, she is able to unveil her “true self,” pursuing vengeance in search for an independent identity.

By incorporating the myth of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, Plath not only furthers her use of myth in transformation, but also intensifies her use of the mythic animal. Although Plath’s use of the horse in “Ariel” demonstrates how she utilizes the animal image as a tool, her use of the lioness in “Purdah” surpasses this idea. Because the female speaker threatens so overwhelmingly to *become* the lioness and attack, this adds intensity to the use of the animal as a prosthesis for the female. Unlike Plath’s short story, “The Fifty-Ninth Bear,” where the bear acts as an agent for the female character in attacking the male, the speaker in “Purdah” actually becomes the predatory animal, conquering the male figure herself. By appropriating animal strength in order for the female image to rise above the domestic domain, “Purdah” is the definitive destination of the trajectory that this chapter has been describing.

While some consider Plath’s poems to be obsessed with death, as Kroll points out, a closer look at her treatment of death is necessary in order to realize that her fascination with it is directly connected with her interest in transcendence and rebirth (5). According

to Frye, "in many Romantic poems...it is suggested that the final identification of and with reality may be or at least include death" in that "death may lead to the highest form of knowledge" (19). Therefore, in this Romantic tradition, in dying Plath's heroines attain a greater sense of knowledge and therefore a greater sense of self.

Conclusion

In 1931 Virginia Woolf gave a speech to a branch of the National Society for Women's Service entitled "Professions for Women."³⁶ Woolf was invited to speak on the issue of women's employment and share some of her own professional experiences as a successful female writer. She begins her speech by explaining that although writing seems simple and cheap enough – "the cheapness of writing paper is, of course, the reason why women have succeeded as writers before they have succeeded in other professions" – women must "do battle with a certain phantom" (236). The phantom, she points out, is "a woman...The Angel in the House" (Woolf 236).³⁷ Woolf argues that "killing the Angel in the House [is] part of the occupation of a woman writer" because the Angel will "guide...the pen" (Woolf 238). The Angel ideology is a construct based on the Victorian ideal of the domestic woman; therefore, if she guides the pen then the woman will remain under the influence of the patriarchy.³⁸ Woolf explains and then justifies her "killing" of the Angel:

I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defence. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing. For, as I found... you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own.... And all these questions, according to the Angel of the House, cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women; they must charm, they must conciliate, they must – to put it bluntly – tell lies if they are to succeed. Thus, whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo

³⁶ This essay was published posthumously in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (1942).

³⁷ The Angel in the House is borrowed from a poem by Coventry Patmore's poem which celebrates Victorian domesticity.

³⁸ Woolf describes the Angel in the House: "[S]he was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily...in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own" (237).

upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her. She died hard. (Woolf 237-238)

For Woolf, this domestic ideology threatens her writing and does not allow for a “mind of your own.” Essentially, Woolf is arguing for the death of what Kroll calls Plath’s “false self.” Only when the female writer is able to kill the patriarchal construction of the Angel, is she successful in gaining autonomy and producing work that challenges the social implications of this definition of woman.

Some twenty-five years after Woolf gave this speech, Plath struggled with similar issues in defining what it meant to be a woman. In a journal entry written in 1959, Plath illustrates her own frustration in attempting to find her “true” voice. She asks, “what inner decision, what inner murder or prison break must I commit if I want to speak from my true deep voice[?]” (J 297). In *My Life A Loaded Gun*, Paula Bennett argues that because male poets have had the privilege and encouragement of self-exploration, “women poets in our culture have been torn between restrictive definitions of what a woman is and their own fears of being or seeming unwomanly” (4).

While there are various aspects of her career – imagery, style, form, even biography – that can be examined in order to trace Plath’s struggle to emerge as a more autonomous figure, her use of non-human animals is the concern of this study. Because “Nature, animals, and women – each likely to be seen as embodied and lacking mind or soul – stand as irrational Others due to culture, human beings, and men” (Birke & Parisi 56-57), the use of the non-human that flourishes in Plath’s work is of major significance.

From tracking the particular animals Plath uses, as well as the particular relationships they have with her gendered protagonists, a clear distinction begins to emerge between her earlier and later writing. Initially, her poetic animals adhere to the typical predator/prey dichotomy, thereby perpetuating the representation of the “victim

woman” and maintaining the role of the dominating male figure. In this early work, the animal figures typically function as a lens through which to view the male-female relationship. Here, the animals are either predators (connected to the male), or prey (connected to the female). The action within these particular pieces of writing rests on the tension (typically violent) between these three figures: male, female, and animal.

There is a distinct change in the function of the animal images present in the writing from October 1962 onwards, which correlates with the disintegration of Plath’s marriage to Hughes. In this later work the presence of the male figure opposite the female subsides as Plath uses the animals to identify or define a revised, more autonomous feminine identity. These poems take on and illustrate the mythic in order to escape the “false” self. As Bennett argues, Plath’s use of myth,

is not without severe internal contradictions, the product of Plath’s highly ambivalent attitude toward autonomy (sic.). Nevertheless, the myth represents Plath’s best effort to ground her sense of self and womanhood on something other than the love and approval of her mother, her society, or a man. (Bennett 152)

While Plath’s work may be riddled with contradictions, she continues, as Rose puts it, to “articulate something very precise about some of the most difficult points of contestation in our contemporary cultural and political life” (10).

Plath is among the recent writers most often considered in the context “feminist,” but while there are undeniable feminist elements to her work, when examined more closely her work complicates this treatment. It is the writing after October 1962 that most feminists gravitate towards in asserting Plath’s own allegiance to the feminist movement. However, when we examine the way in which her female figures work alongside her animal images, this proves to be problematic. Because, as I have stated previously, there is an immediate association between women and animals as Others, in a feminist context this needs to be addressed. Through the particular roles that the animals take on, Plath is

not adhering in a simple way to a feminist ideology. In order for her female figures to transcend their victim positions, not only do they turn to the mythological, but the animals/women also take on "masculine" characteristics in order to achieve a revised identity. It is only within myth that the female identity is able to transcend its previous position; therefore she must erase any "real" femaleness and enter wholly into the mythological. As a reader, one must ask: Is the female really gaining independence if she must take on "masculine" characteristics to gain an autonomous identity? Does this not just confirm the privilege of masculinity?

If Plath is an ambivalent feminist, she is also problematic from a human-animal perspective as an "animal writer." In this context Hughes offers an instructive comparison. Unlike Plath, Hughes tends to allow his non-human figures retain their *animalness*. This is not to say that he never links animal and human images. Many of his poems, in fact, do make a correlation between the human and non-human; however, unlike Plath who constantly blends the two, Hughes maintains an independent "animal identity." For Hughes, then, poetry allows for an exploration of the poetic animal as *animal*. Even though Plath is not typically considered an "animal writer," her incorporation of non-human images allows for a productive examination of their use within her writing. However, unlike Hughes and other Nature or animal writers who aim to maintain a sense of the "realness" of the non-human in their writing, Plath uses her animal images to explore human roles and relationships, thereby erasing the animals' independent identities. Her animals function as prostheses for her human figures, allowing the latter to gain a greater understanding of a relationship, as seen in Chapter I, or of their own identity, as seen in Chapter II. In either case, Plath utilizes them for her own purposes and therefore the animal as *animal* fails to emerge. Animals are represented only in terms of the human figures.

In this thesis, I have illustrated the connection between Plath's use of animals and her use of gender. As Atwood argues in *Survival*, Nature in literature typically includes an underlying message about external forces (49). Utilizing animals allows Plath to follow Woolf's instructions and kill the Angel in the House (Woolf 151-152). Although many of her earlier animal images help maintain the "victim woman" role, her lioness, horse, phoenix, and queen bee rise above it, leaving the phantom Angel dead and revising the traditional gender dichotomy through the agency of a more expressive and autonomous female subject.

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